WHY
AUTHORS
GO WRONG
GRANT M. OVERTON

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WHY AUTHORS GO WRONG

AND

OTHER EXPLANATIONS

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BY

GRANT M. OVERTON

AUTHOR OF "THE WOMEN WHO MAKE OUR NOVELS"

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I

WHY AUTHORS GO WRONG

THE subject of *Why Authors Go Wrong* is one to answering which a book might adequately be devoted and perhaps we shall write a book about it one of these days, but not now. When, as and if written the book dealing with the question will necessarily show the misleading nature of Mr. Arnold Bennett's title, *The Truth About an Author*—a readable little volume which does not tell the truth about an author in general, but only what we are politely requested to accept as the truth about Arnold Bennett. Mr. Bennett may or may not be telling the truth about himself in that book; his regard for the truth in respect of the characters of his fiction has been variable. Perhaps he is more scrupulous when it comes to himself, but we are at liberty to doubt it. For a man who will

occasionally paint other persons—even fictionary persons—as worse than they really are may not unnaturally be expected to depict himself as somewhat better than he is.

We must not stay with Mr. Bennett any longer just now. It is enough that he has not been content to wait for the curtain to rise and has insisted on thrusting himself into our prologue. Exit; and let us get back where we were.

We were indicating that *Why Authors Go Wrong* is an extensive subject. It is so extensive because there are many authors and many, many more readers. It is extensive because it is a moral and not a literary question, a human and not an artistic problem. It is extensive because it is really unanswerable and anything that is essentially unanswerable necessitates prolonged efforts to answer it, this on the well known theory that it is better that many be bored than that a few remain dissatisfied.

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Let us take up these considerations one by one.

It seems unlikely that any one will misunderstand the precise subject itself. What, exactly, is meant by an author "going wrong"? The familiar euphemism, as perhaps most frequently used, is anything but ambiguous. Ambiguous-sounding words are generally fraught with a deadly and specific

meaning—another illustration of the eternal paradox of sound and sense.

But as used in the instance of an author, "going wrong" has a great variety of meanings. An author has gone wrong, for example, when he has deliberately done work under his best; he has gone wrong when he has written for sentimental or æsthetic reasons and not, as he should, for money primarily; he has gone wrong when he tries to uplift or educate his readers; he has gone wrong when he has written too many books, or has not written enough books, or has written too fast or not fast enough, or has written what he saw and not what he felt, or what he felt and not what he saw, or posed in any fashion whatsoever.

Ezra Pound, for example, has gone atrociously wrong by becoming a French Decadent instead of remaining a son of Idaho and growing up to be an American. Of course as a French Decadent he will always be a failure; as Benjamin De Casseres puts it, "the reality underlying his exquisite art is bourgeois and American. He is a ghost materialized by cunning effects of lights and mirrors."

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Mr. Robert W. Chambers went wrong in an entirely different fashion. The usual charge brought against Mr. Chambers is that he consented to do

less than his best because it profited him. This is entirely untrue. Mr. Chambers's one mistake was that he did not write to make money. Every writer should, because writing is a business and a business is something which can only be decently conducted with that end in view. Fancy a real estate business which should not be conducted to make money! We should have to stop it immediately. It would be a menace to the community, for there is no telling what wickedness of purpose might lie behind it. A business not conducted primarily to make money is not a business but a blind; and very likely a cover for operations of a criminal character. The safety of mankind lies in knowing motives and is imperilled by any enterprise that disguises them.

And so for Mr. Chambers to refrain deliberately from writing to make money was a very wrong thing for him to do. Far from having a wicked motive, he had a highly creditable motive, which does not excuse him in the least. His praiseworthy purpose was to write the best that was in him for the sake of giving pleasure to the widest possible number of his readers. There does not seem to be much doubt that he has done it; those who most disapprove of him will hardly deny that the vast sales of his half a hundred stories are incontestable evidence of his success in his aim. But what is the result? On every hand he is misjudged and con-

demned. He is accused of acting on the right motive, which is called wrong! He is not blamed, as he should be, for acting on a wrong motive, which would, if understood, have been called right! What he should have done, of course, was to write sanely and consistently to make money, as did Amelia Barr. Mrs. Barr was not a victim of widespread contemporary injustice and Mr. Chambers is and will remain so.

Take another illustration—Mr. Winston Churchill. One of the ablest living American novelists, he has gone so wrong that it cannot honestly be supposed he will ever go right again. His earlier novels were not only delightful but actually important. His later novels are intolerable. In such a novel as *The Inside of the Cup* Mr. Churchill is not writing with the honorable and matter-of-course object of selling a large number of copies and getting an income from them; he is writing with the dishonorable and unavowed object of setting certain ideas before you, the contemplation of which will, in his opinion, do you good. He wants you to think about the horror of a clergyman in leading strings to his wealthiest parishioner. As a fact, there is no horror in such a situation and Mr. Churchill cannot conjure up any. There is no horror, there are only two fools. Now if a man is a fool, he's a fool; he cannot become anything else, least of all a sensible man. A clergyman in thrall to a rich individual of his congrega-

tion is a fool; and to picture him as painfully emancipating himself and becoming not only sensible but, as it were, heroic is to ask us to accept a contradiction in terms. For a fool is not a man who lacks sense, but a man who cannot acquire sense. Not even a miracle can make him sensible; if it could there would be no trouble with *The Inside of the Cup,* for a miracle, being, as G. K. Chesterton says, merely an exceptional occurrence, will always be acquiesced in by the intelligent reader.

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It would be possible to continue at great length giving examples of authors who have gone wrong and specifying the fifty-seven varieties of ways they have erred. But the mere enumeration of fallen authors is terribly depressing and quite useless. If we are to accomplish any good end we must try to find out why they have allowed themselves to be deceived or betrayed and what can be done in the shape of rescue work or preventive effort in the future. Perhaps we can reclaim some of them and guide others aright.

After a consideration of cases—we shall not clog the discussion with statistics and shall confine ourselves to general results—we have been led by all the evidence to the conclusion that the principal trouble is with the authors. Little or none of the blame for

the unfortunate situation rests on their readers. Indeed, in the majority of cases the readers are the great and unyielding force making for sanity and virtue in the author. Without the persistent moral pressure exerted by their readers many, many more authors would certainly stray from the path of business rectitude—not literary rectitude, for there is no such thing. What is humanly right is right in letters and nothing is right in letters that is wrong in the world.

The commonest way in which authors go wrong is one already stated: By ceasing to write primarily for money, for a living and as much more as may come the writer's way. The commonest reason why authors go wrong in this way is comical—or would be if it were not so common. They feel ashamed to write for money first and last; they are seized with an absurd idea that there is something implicitly disgraceful in acting upon such a motive. And so to avoid something that they falsely imagine to be disgraceful they do something that they know is disgraceful; they write from some other motive and let the reader innocently think they are writing with the old and normal and honorable motive.

So widespread is this delusion that it is absolutely necessary to digress for a moment and explain why writing to make money is respectable! Why is anything respectable? Because it meets a human necessity and meets it in an open and aboveboard

fashion without detriment to society in general or the individual in particular. All lawful business conforms to this definition and writing for money certainly does. Writing—or painting or sculpturing or anything else—not done to make money is not respectable because (1) it meets no human necessity, (2) it is not done openly and aboveboard, (3) it is invariably detrimental to society, and (4) it is nearly always harmful to individuals, and most harmful to the individual engaged upon it.

It is useless to say that a man who writes or paints or carves for something other than money meets a human necessity—a spiritual thirst for beauty, perhaps. There is no spiritual thirst for beauty which cannot be satisfied completely by work done for an adequate and monetary reward. And to satisfy the human longing for the beautiful without requiring a proper price is to demoralize society by showing men that they can have something for nothing.

5

Now it is just here that the moral pressure of the great body of readers is felt, a pressure that is constantly misunderstood by the author. So surely as the writer has turned from writing to make money and has taken up writing for art's sake (whatever that means) or writing for some ethical purpose or writing in the interest of some propa-

ganda, though it be merely the propaganda of his own poor, single intellect—just so surely as he has done this his readers find him out. Whether they then continue to read him or not depends entirely on what they think of his new and unavowed (but patent) motive. Of course readers ought to be stern; having caught their author in a wrong motive they ought to punish him by deserting him instantly. But readers are human; they are even surprisingly selfish at times; they are capable of considering their own enjoyment, and, dreadful to say, they are capable of considering it first. So if, as in the case of Mr. Chambers, they find his new motive friendly and flattering they read him more than ever; on the other hand, if they find the changed purpose disagreeable or tiresome, aiming to uplift them or to shock them unpleasantly or (sometimes) to make fun of them, they quit that author cold. And they hardly ever come back. Usually the author is not perspicacious enough to grasp the cause of the defection; it is amazing how seldom authors think there can be anything wrong with themselves. Usually the abandoned author goes right over and joins a small sect of highbrows and proclaims the deplorable state of his national literature. "The public be damned!" he says in effect, but the public is not damned, it is he that is damned, and the public has done its utmost to save him.

Sometimes an author deliberately does work that

is less than his best, but he never does this with the idea of making money, or, if he entertains that idea, he fools no one but himself. There are known and even (we believe) recorded instances of an author ridiculing his own output and avowing with what he probably thought audacious candor: "Of course, this latest story of mine is junk—but it'll sell 100,000 copies!"

It never does. The author is perfectly truthful in describing the book as worthless. If he implies as he always will in such a case that he deliberately did less than his best he is an unconscious liar. It was his best and its worthlessness was solely the result of his total insincerity. For a man or woman may write a very bad book and write it with an utter sincerity that will sell hundreds of thousands of copies; but no one can write a very fine book insincerely and have it sell.

The author who thinks that he has written a rather inferior novel for the sake of huge royalties has actually written the best he has in him, namely, a piece of cheese. The author who has actually written beneath his best has not done it for money, but to avoid making money. He thinks it is his best; he thinks it is something utterly artistic, æsthetically wonderful, highbrowedly pure, lofty and serene; he scorns money; to make money by it would be to soil it. What he cannot see is that it is not his best; that it is very likely quite his worst;

that when he has done his best he will unavoidably make money unless, like the misguided mortal we have just mentioned, deep insincerity vitiates his work.

We are therefore ready, before going further, to formulate certain paradoxical principles governing all literary work.

6

To understand why authors go wrong we must first understand how authors may go right. The paradoxical rules which if observed will hold the author to the path of virtue and rectitude may be formulated briefly as follows:

1. An author must write to make money first of all, and every other purpose must be secondary to this purpose of money making.

The paradoxy inherent in this principle is that while writing the author must never for a single moment think of the money he may make.

2. Every writer must have a stern and insistent moral purpose in his writing, and especially must he be animated by this purpose if he is writing fiction.

The paradoxy here is that never, under any circumstances, may the writer exhibit his moral purpose in his work.

3. A writer must not write too much nor must he write too little. He is writing too much if his

successive books sell better and better; he is writing too little if each book shows declining sales.

This may appear paradoxical, but consider: If the writer's work is selling with accelerated speed the market for his wares will very quickly be oversupplied. This happened to Mr. Kipling one day. He had the wisdom to stop writing almost entirely, to let his production fall to an attenuated trickle; with the result that saturation was avoided, and there is now and will long continue to be a good, brisk, steady demand for his product.

On the other hand, consider the case of Mrs. Blank (the reader will not expect us to be either so ungallant or so professionally unethical or so commercially unfair as to give her name). Mrs. Blank wrote a book every two or three years, and each was more of a plug than its predecessor. She began writing a book a year, and the third volume under her altered schedule was a best seller. It was also her best novel.

7

Then why? why? why? do the authors go wrong? Because, if we must say it in plain English, they disregard every principle of successful authorship. When they have written a book or two and have made money they get it into their heads that it is ignoble to write for money and they try to write

for something else—for Art, usually. But it is impossible to write for Art, for Art is not an end but a means. When they do not try to write for Art they try to write for an Ethical Purpose, but they exhibit it as inescapably as if the book were a pulpit and the reader were sitting in a pew. Indeed, some modern fiction cannot be read unless you are sitting in a pew, and a very stiff and straight backed pew at that; not one of these old fashioned, roomy, high walled family pews such as Dickens let us sit in, pews in which one could be comfortable and easy and which held the whole family, pews in which you could box the children's ears lightly without doing it publicly; no! the pews the novelists make us sit in these days are these confounded modern pews which stop with a jab in the small of your back and which are no better than public benches, but are intensely more uncomfortable—pews in which, to ease your misery, you can do nothing but look for the mote in your neighbor's eye and the wrong color in your neighbor's cravat.

Because—to get back to the whys of the authors—because when they are popular they overpopularize themselves, and when they are unpopular they lack the gumption to write more steadily and fight more gamely for recognition. We don't mean critical recognition, but popular recognition. How can an author expect the public, his public, any public, to go on swallowing him in increased amounts

at meals placed ever closer together—for any length of time? And how, equally, can an author expect a public, his public, or any public, to acquire a taste for his work when he serves them a sample once a week, then once a month, then once a year? Why, a person could not acquire a taste for olives that way.

8

We have no desire to be personal for the sake of being personal, but we have every desire to be personal in this discussion for the sake of being impersonal, pointed, helpful and clear. It is time to take a perfectly fresh and perfectly illustrative example of how not to write fiction. We shall take the case of Mr. Owen Johnson and his new novel, *Virtuous Wives.*

Mr. Johnson will be suspected by the dense and conventional censors of American literature of having written *Virtuous Wives* to make money. Alackaday, no! If he had a much better book might have come from his typewriter. Mr. Johnson was not thinking primarily of money, as he should have been (prior to the actual writing of the story). He was filled with a moral and uplifting aim. He had been shocked to the marrow by the spectacle of the lives led by some New York women—the kind Alice Duer Miller writes discreetly about. The participation of America in the war had not begun. The

performances of an inconsiderable few were unduly conspicuous. Mr. Johnson decided to write a novel that would hold up these disgusting triflers (and worse) to the scorn of sane and decent Americans. He set to work. He finished his book. It was serialized in one of the several magazines which have displaced forever the old Sunday school library in the field of Awful Warning literature. In these forums Mr. Galsworthy and Gouverneur Morris inscribe our present day chronicles of the Schoenberg-Cotta family, and writ large over their instalments, as part of the editorial blurb, we read the expression of a fervent belief that Vice has never been so Powerfully, Brilliantly and Convincingly Depicted in All Its Horror by Any Pen. But we divagate.

Mr. Johnson's novel was printed serially and appeared then as a book with a solemn preface—the final indecent exhibition, outside of the story itself, of his serious moral purpose. And as a book it is failing utterly of its purpose. It has sold and is selling and Mr. Johnson is making and will make money out of it—which is what he did not want. What he did want he made impossible when he unmasked his great aim.

The world may be perverse, but you have to take it as it is. The world may be childish, but none of us will live to see it grow up. If the world thinks you write with the honest and understandable object of making a living it attributes no ulterior mo-

tive to you. The world says: "John Smith, the butcher, sells me beeksteak in order to buy Mrs. Smith a new hat and the little Smiths shoes." The world buys the steaks and relishes them. But if John Smith tells the world and his wife every time they come to his shop: "I am selling you this large, juicy steak to give you good red blood and make you Fit," then the world and his wife are resentful and say: "We think we don't like your large, juicy steaks. We are red blooded enough to have our own preferences. We will just go on down the street to the delicatessen—we mean the Liberty food shop—and buy some de-Hohenzollernized frankfurters, the well known Liberty sausage. To hell with the Kaiser!" And so John Smith merely makes money. Oh, yes, he makes money; a large, juicy steak is a large, juicy steak no matter how deadly the good intent in selling it. But John Smith is defeated in his real purpose. He does not furnish the world and his wife with the red corpuscles he yearned to give them.

9

At this juncture we seem to hear exasperated cries of this character: "What do you mean by saying that an author must write for money first and last and yet must have a stern moral purpose? How can the two be reconciled? Why must he

think of money until he begins to write and never after he begins to write? We understand why the moral object must not obtrude itself, but why need it be there at all?"

Can a man serve two masters? Can he serve money and morality? Foolish question No. 58,914! He not only can but he always does when his work is good.

A painter—a good painter—is a man who burns to enrich the world with his work and is determined to make the world pay him decently for it. A good sculptor is a man who has gritted his teeth with a resolution to give the world certain beautiful figures for which the world must reward him—or he will know the reason why! A good corset manufacturer is a man who is filled with an almost holy yearning to make people more shapely and more comfortable than he found them—and he is fanatically resolved that they shall acknowledge his achievement by making him rich!

For that's the whole secret. How is a man to know that he has painted great portraits or landscapes or carved lovely monuments or made thousands shapelier and more easeful if not by the money they paid him? How is an author to know that he has amused or instructed thousands if not by the size of his royalty checks? By hearsay? By mind reading? By plucking the petals of a daisy—"They love me. They love me not"?

Every man can and must serve two masters, but the one is the thing that masters him and the other is the evidence of his mastery. Every man must before beginning work fix his mind intently upon the making of money, the money which shall be an evidence of his mastery; every man on beginning work and for the duration of the work must fix his mind intently and exclusively on the service of morality, the great master whose slave he is in the execution of an Invisible Purpose. And no man dare let his moral purpose expose itself in his work, for to do that is to do a presumptuous and sacrilegious thing. The Great Moralizer, who has in his hands each little one of us workers, holds his Purpose invisible to us; how then can we venture to make visible what He keeps invisible, how can we have the audacity to practice a technique that He Himself does not employ?

For He made the world and all that is in it. And He made it with a moral end in view, as we most of us believe. But not the wisest of us pretends that that moral object is clearly visible. It does not disclose itself to us directly; we are aware of it only indirectly; and are influenced by it forevermore. If the world was so made, who are we that think ourselves so much more adroit than Him as to be able to expose boldly what He veils and to reveal what He hath hidden?

There are those, of course, who see no moral ex-

planation of the universe; but they are not always consistent. There is that famous passage of Joseph Conrad's in which he declines the ethical view and says he would fondly regard the panorama of creation as pure spectacle—the marvellous spectacle being, perchance, a moral end in itself. And yet no man ever wrote with a deeper manifestation and a more perfect concealment of his moral purpose than Conrad; for exactly the thing to which all his tales are passionate witnesses is the sense of fidelity, of loyalty, of endurance—above all, the sense of fidelity—that exists in mankind. Man, in the Conradist view, is a creature of an inexhaustible loyalty to himself and to his fellows. This inner and utter fidelity it is which makes the whole legend of *Lord Jim,* which is the despairing cry that rings out at the last in *Victory,* which reaches lyric heights in *Youth,* which is the profound pathos of *The End of the Tether,* which, in its corruption by an incorruptible metal, the silver of the mine, forms the dreadful tragedy of *Nostromo.* An immortal, Conrad, but not the admiring and passive spectator he diffidently declares himself to be!

10

Have we covered all the cases? Obviously not. It is no more possible to deal with all the authors

who go wrong than it is to call all the sinners to repentance. But sin is primarily a question between the sinner and his own conscience, and the errors of authors are invariably questions between the authors and the public. The public is the best conscience many an author has; and the substitution of a private self-justification for a public vindication has seldom been a markedly successful undertaking in human history. Yet there is a class of writers for whom no public vindication is possible; who affect, indeed, to scorn it; who set themselves up as little gods. They are the worshippers of Art. They are the ones who not only do not admit but who deliberately deny a moral purpose in anything; who think that a something they call pure Beauty is the sole end of existence, of work, of life, and is alone to be worshipped. It is a cult of Baal.

For these Artists despise money, and in despising money they cheapen themselves and become creatures of barter. They sneer at morality and reject it; immediately the world disappears: "And the earth was without form, and void." They demoralize honest people with whom they come in contact by demolishing the possibly imperfect but really workable standards which govern normal lives—and never replacing them. What is their Beauty? It is what each one of them thinks beautiful. What is their Art? It is what each cold

little selfish soul among them chooses to call Art. What is their achievement? Self-destruction. They are the spiritual suicides, they are the moral defectives, they are the outcasts of humanity, the lepers among the workers of the world. For them there can be neither pity nor forgiveness; for they deny the beauty of rewarded toil, the sincerity of honest labor, the mystical humanity of man.

Of them no more. Let us go back in a closing moment to the contemplation of the great body of men and women who labor cheerfully and honorably, if rather often somewhat mistakenly, to make their living, to do good work and make the world pay them for it, yet leaving with the world the firm conviction that it has had a little the better of the bargain! These are the authors who "go wrong," and with whose well meant errors we have been dealing, not very methodically but perhaps not unhelpfully. Is there, then, no parting word of advice we can give our authors? To be sure there is! When our authors are quite sure they will not go wrong, they may go write!

A BARBARIC YAWP

II

A BARBARIC YAWP

IT was the handy phrase to describe Walt Whitman: The "barbaric yawp." In its elegant inelegance the neatly adjectived noun was felt to be really brilliant. Stump speakers "made the eagle scream"; a chap like Whitman had to be characterized handily too.

The epigrammatic mind is the card index mind. Now the remarkable thing about the card index is its casualty list. People who card index things are people who proceed to forget those things. The same metal rod that transfixes the perforated cards pierces the indexers' brains. A mechanical device has been called into play. Brains are unnecessary any more. The day of pigeonholes was slightly better; for the pigeonholes were not unlike the human brain in which things are tucked away together, because they really have some association with each other. But the card index alphabetizes ruthlessly. Fancy an alphabetical brain!

Epigrams are like that. A man cannot take the trouble to think; he falls back on an epigram. He cannot take the trouble to remember and so he card indexes. The upshot is that he can find

nothing in the card index and of course has no recollection to fall back on. Or he recalls the epigram without having the slightest idea what it was meant to signify.

But this is not to be about card indexes nor even about epigrams. It is to be a barbaric yawp, by which it is to be supposed was once meant the happy consciousness and the proud wonder that struck into the heart of an American poet. Whitman was not so much a poet as the chanteyman of Longfellow's Ship of State. There was an hour when the chanteyman had an inspiration, when he saw as by an apocalyptic light all the people of these United States linked and joined in a common effort. Every man, woman and child of the millions tailed on the rope; every one of them put his weight and muscle to the task. It was a tremendous hour. It was the hour of a common effort. It was the hour for which, Walt felt, men had risked their lives a century earlier. It was a revealed hour; it had not yet arrived; but it was sure to come. And in the glow of that revelation the singer lifted up his voice and sang. . . . God grant he may be hearing the mighty chorus!

2

America is not a land, but a people. And a people may have no land and still they will remain

a people. There has, for years, been no country of Poland; but there are Poles. There has been a country of Russia for centuries, but there is to-day no Russian people. What makes a people? Not a land certainly. Not political forms nor political sovereignty. Not even political independence. Nor, for that matter, voices that pretend or aspire to speak the thoughts of a nation. Poland has had such voices and Russia has had her artists, musicians, novelists, poets.

The thing that makes a people is a thing over which statesmen have no control. Geography throws no light on the subject. Nor does that study of the races of man which is called anthropology. It is not a psychological secret (psychology covers a multitude of guesses). Philosophy may evolve beautiful systems of thought, but systems of thought have nothing to do with the particular puzzle before us.

The secret must be sought elsewhere. Is it an inherited thing, this thing that makes a people? That can't be; ours is a mixed inheritance here in America. Is it an abstract idea? Abstract ideas are never more than architectural pencillings and seldom harden into concrete foundations. Is it a common emotion? If it were we should be able to agree on a name for it. Is it an instinct? An instinct might be back of it.

What is left? Can it be a religion? As such

it should be easily recognizable. But an element of religion? An act of faith?

Yes, for faith may exist with or without a creed, and the act of faith may be deliberate or involuntary. Willed or unwilled the faith is held; formulated or unformulated the essential creed is there. Let us look at the people of America, men and women of very divergent types and tempers far apart; men and women of inextricable heredities and of confusing beliefs—even, ordinarily, of clashing purposes. Each believes a set of things, but the beliefs of them all can be reduced to a lowest common denominator, a belief in each other; just as the beliefs of them all have a highest common multiple, a willingness to die in defence of America. To some of them America means a past, to some the past has no meaning; to some of them America means a future, to others a future is without significance. But to all of them America means a present to be safeguarded at the cost of their lives, if need be; and the fact that the present is the translation of the past to some and the reading of the future to others is incidental.

3

We would apply these considerations to the affair of literature; and having been tiresomely generaliz-

ing we shall get down to cases that every one can understand.

The point we have tried to make condenses to this: The present is supremely important to us all. To some of us it is all important because of the past, and to some of us it is of immense moment because of the future, and to the greatest number (probably) the present is of overshadowing concern because it *is* the present—the time when they count and make themselves count. It is now or never, as it always is in life, though the urgency of the hour is not always so apparent.

It was now or never with the armies in the field, with the men training in the camps, with the coal miners, the shipbuilders, the food savers in the kitchens. It is just as much now or never with the poets, the novelists, the essayists—with the workers in every line, although they may not see so distinctly the immediacy of the hour. Everybody saw the necessity of doing things to win the war; many can see the necessity of doing things that will constitute a sort of winning after the war. There is always something to be won. If it is not a war it is an after the war. "Peace hath its victories no less renowned than war" is a fine sounding line customarily recited without the slightest recognition of its real meaning. The poet did not mean that the victories of peace were as greatly acclaimed as the victories of war, but that the sum

total of their renown was as great or greater because they are more enduring.

4

Now for the cases.

It is the duty, the opportunity and the privilege of America now, in the present hour, to make it impossible hereafter for any one to raise such a question as Bliss Perry brings up in his book *The American Spirit in Literature,* namely, whether there is an independent American literature. Not only does Mr. Perry raise the question, but, stated as baldly as we have stated it, the query was thereupon discussed, with great seriousness, by a well-known American book review! We are happy to say that both Mr. Perry and the book review decided that there *is* such a thing as an American literature, and that American writing is not a mere adjunct (perhaps a caudal appendage) of English literature. All Americans will feel deeply gratified that they could honorably come to such a conclusion. But not all Americans will feel gratified that the conclusion was reached on the strength of Emerson, Lowell, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, Whitman, Poe and others of the immortal dead. Some Americans will wish with a faint and timid longing that the conclusion might have been reached, or at least sustained, on the

strength of Tarkington, Robert Herrick, Edith Wharton, Mary Johnston, Gertrude Atherton, Mary S. Watts, William Allen White, Edgar Lee Masters, Amy Lowell, Edna Ferber, Joseph Hergesheimer, Owen Wister and a dozen or so other living writers over whose relative importance as witnesses for the affirmative we have no desire to quarrel. Mr. Howells, we believe, was called to the stand.

If we had not seen it we should refuse to credit our senses. The idea of any one holding court to-day to decide the question as to the existence of an independent American literature is incredibly funny. It is the peculiarity of criticism that any one can set up a court anywhere at any time for any purpose and with unlimited jurisdiction. There are no rules of procedure. There are no rules of evidence. There is no jury; the people who read books may sit packed in the court room, but there must be no interruptions. Order in the court! Usually the critic judge sits alone, but sometimes there are special sessions with a full bench. Writs are issued, subpœnas served, witnesses are called and testimony is taken. An injunction may be applied for, either temporary or permanent. Nothing is easier than to be held in contempt.

5

The most striking peculiarity of procedure in the Critical Court is with regard to what constitutes evidence. You might, in the innocence of your heart, suppose that a man's writings would constitute the only admissible evidence. Not at all. His writings have really nothing to do with the case. What is his Purpose? If, as a sincere individual, he has anywhere exposed or stated his object in writing books counsel objects to the admission of this Purpose as evidence on the ground that it is incompetent, irrelevant and immaterial; and not sound Art. On the other hand if, as an artist, he has embodied his Purpose in his fiction so that every intelligent reader may discover it for himself and feel the glow of a personal discovery, counsel will object to the admission of his books as evidence on the ground that they are incompetent, irrelevant and immaterial; and not the best proof. Counsel will demand that the man himself be examined personally as to his purpose (if he is alive) or will demand a searching examination of his private life (if he be dead). The witness is always a culprit and browbeating the witness is always in order. I am a highbrow and you are a lowbrow; what the devil do you mean by writing a book anyway?

Before the trial begins the critic-judge enunciates

certain principles on which the verdict will be based and the verdict is based on those principles whether they find any application in the testimony or not. A favorite principle with the man on the bench is that all that is not obscure is not Art. It isn't phrased as intelligibly as that, to be sure; a common way to put it is to lay down the rule that the popularity of a book (which means the extent to which it is understood and therefore appreciated) has nothing to do with the case, tra-la, has nothing to do with the case. Another principle is that sound can be greater than sense, which, in the lingo of the Highest Criticism, is the dictum that words and sentences can have a beauty apart from the meaning (if any) that they seek to convey. And there really is something in this idea; for example, what could be lovelier than the old line, "Eeny, meeny, miny-mo"? Shakespeare, a commercial fellow who wrote plays for a living, knew this when he let one of his characters sing:

"When that I was and a little tiny boy,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
A foolish thing was but a toy,
For the rain it raineth every day."

And a little earlier in *Twelfth Night:*

"Like a mad lad,
Pare thy nails, dad;
Adieu, goodman devil."

Which is not only beautiful as sound, but without the least sense unless it hath the vulgarity to be looked for in the work of a mercenary playwright.

6

But the strangest thing about the proceedings in the Critical Court is their lack of contemporary interest. Rarely, indeed, is anything decided here until it has been decided everywhere else. For the great decisions are the decisions of life and not decisions on the past. A man has written twenty books and he is dead. He is ripe for consideration by the Critical Court. A man has written two novels and has eighteen more ahead of him. The Critical Court will leave him alone until he is past all helping. It seems never to occur to the critic-judge that a young man who has written two novels is more important than a dead man who has written twenty novels. For the young man who has written two novels has some novels yet to be written; he can be helped, strengthened, encouraged, advised, corrected, warned, counselled, rebuked, praised, blamed, presented with bills of particulars, and—heartened. If he has not genius nothing can put it in him, but if he has, many things can be done to help him exploit it. And a man who is dead cannot be affected by anything you say or do; the critic-judge has lost his chance

of shaping that writer's work and can no longer write a decree, only an epitaph.

To be brutally frank: Nobody cares what the Critical Court thinks of Whitman or Poe or Longfellow or Hawthorne. Everybody cares what Tarkington does next, what Mary Johnston tackles, what the developments are in the William Allen White case, what becomes of Joseph Hergesheimer, whether Amy Lowell achieves great work in that contrapuntal poetry she calls polyphonic prose. On these things depend the present era in American literature and the possibilities of the future. And these things are more or less under our control.

The people of America not only believe that there is an independent American literature, but they believe that there will continue to be. Some of them believe in the past of that literature, some of them believe in its future; but all of them believe in its present and its presence. Their voice may be stifled in the Critical Court (silence in the court!) but it is audible everywhere else. It is heard in the bookshops where piles of new fiction melt away, where new verse is in brisk demand, where new biographies and historical works are bought daily and where books on all sorts of weighty subjects flake down from the shelves into the hands of customers.

The voice of the American people is articulate in the offices of newspapers which deal with the news

of new books. It makes a seismographic record in the ledgers of publishing houses. It comes to almost every writer in letters of inquiry, comment and commendation. What, do you suppose, a writer like Gene Stratton-Porter cares whether the Critical Court excludes her work or condemns it? She can reread hundreds and thousands of letters from men and women who tell her how profoundly her books have—tickled their fancy? pleased their love of verbal beauty? taxed their intellectuals to understand? No, merely how profoundly her books have altered their whole lives.

Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! The Critical Court is in session. All who have business with the court draw near and give attention!

IN THE CRITICAL COURT

III

IN THE CRITICAL COURT

THE Critical Court being in session, William Dean Howells, H. W. Boynton, W. C. Brownell, Wilson Follett and William Marion Reedy sitting, the case of Booth Tarkington, novelist, is called.

COUNSEL FOR THE PROSECUTION: If it please the court, this case should go over. The defendant, Mr. Tarkington, is not dead yet.

Mr. HOWELLS: I do not know how my colleagues feel, but I have no objection to considering the work of Mr. Tarkington while he is alive.

Mr. FOLLETT: I think it would be better if we deferred the consideration of Mr. Tarkington until it is a little older.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE (*in this case Mr. Robert Cortes Holliday, biographer of Tarkington*): "It"?

Mr. FOLLETT: I mean his work, or works. Perhaps I should have said "them."

Mr. HOLLIDAY: "They," not "them." Exception. And "are" instead of "is." Gentlemen, I

have no wish to prejudice the case for my client, but I must point out that if you wait until he is a little older he may be dead.

Mr. BOYNTON: So much the better. We can then consider his works in their complete state and with reference to his entire life.

Mr. HOLLIDAY: But it would then be impossible to give any assistance to Mr. Tarkington. The chance to influence his work would have passed.

Mr. BROWNELL: That is relatively unimportant.

Mr. HOLLIDAY: I beg pardon but Mr. Tarkington feels it rather important to him.

Mr. BOYNTON: My dear Mr. Holliday, you really must remember that it is not what seems important to Mr. Tarkington that can count with us, but what is important in our eyes.

Mr. HOLLIDAY: Self-importance.

Mr. BOYNTON (*stiffly*): Certainly not. Merely self-confidence. But on my own behalf I may say this: I am unwilling to consider Mr. Tarkington's works in this place at this time; but I am willing to pass judgment in an article for a newspaper or a monthly magazine or some other purely perishable medium. That should be sufficient for Mr. Tarkington.

Mr. FOLLETT: I think the possibility of considering Mr. Tarkington must be ruled out, anyway, as one or more of his so-called works have first appeared serially in the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Mr. Holliday (*noting the effect of this revelation on the members of the court*): Very well, I will not insist. Booth, you will have to get along the best you can with newspaper and magazine reviews and with what people write to you or tell you face to face. Be brave, Tark, and do as you aren't done by. After all, a few million people read you and you make enough to live on. The court will pass on you after you are dead, and if you dictate any books on the ouija board the court's verdict may be helpful to you then; you might even manage the later Henry James manner.

Clerk of the Court (*Prof. William Lyon Phelps*): Next case! Mrs. Atherton please step forward!

Mrs. Atherton (*advancing with composure*): I can find no one to act for me, so I will be my own counsel. I will say at the outset that I do not care for the court, individually or collectively, nor for its verdict, whatever it may be.

Prof. Phelps: I must warn you that anything you say may, and probably will, be used against you.

Mrs. Atherton: Oh, I don't mind that; it's the things the members of the court have said against me that I purpose to use against them.

Mr. Brownell: Are you, by any chance, referring to me, Madam?

Mrs. Atherton: I do not refer to persons, Mr.

Brownell. I hit them. No, I had Mr. Boynton particularly in mind. And perhaps Gene Stratton-Porter. Is she here? (*Looks around menacingly*). No. Well, go ahead with your nonsense.

Mr. Howells (*rising*): I think I will withdraw from consideration of this case. Mrs. Atherton has challenged me so often——

Mr. Boynton: No, stay. *I* am going to stick it out——

Mr. Follett: I think there is no question but that we should hold the defendant in contempt.

Mrs. Atherton: Mutual, I assure you. (*She sweeps out of the room and a large section of the public quietly follows her.*)

Clerk Phelps: Joseph Hergesheimer to the bar! (*A short, stocky fellow with twinkling eyes steps forward.*) Mr. Hergesheimer?

Mr. Hergesheimer: Right.

Mr. Reedy: Good boy, Joe!

Mr. Follett: It won't do, it won't do at all. There's only *The Three Black Pennys* and *Gold and Iron* and a novel called *Java Head* to go by. *Saturday Evening Post.* And bewilderingly unlike each other. Seem artistic but are too popular, I fancy, really to be sound.

Mr. Hergesheimer: With all respect, I should like to ask whether this is a court of record?

Mr. Howells: It is.

Mr. Hergesheimer: In that case I think I shall

press for a verdict which may be very helpful to me. I should like also to have the members of the court on record respecting my work.

Mr. Boynton: Just as I feared. My dear fellow, while we should like to be helpful and will endeavor to give you advice to that end it must be done unobtrusively . . . current reviews . . . we'll compare your work with that of Hawthorne and Hardy or perhaps a standard Frenchman. That will give you something to work for. But you cannot expect us to say anything definite about you at this stage of your work. Suppose we were to say what we really think, or what some really think, that you are the most promising writer in America to-day, promising in the sense that you have most of your work before you and in the sense that your work is both popular and artistically fine. Don't you see the risk?

Mr. Hergesheimer: I do, and I also see that you would make your own reputation much more than you would make mine. I write a story. I risk everything with that story. You deliver a verdict. Why shouldn't you take a decent chance, too?

Mr. Follett: Why should I take any more chances than I have to with my contemporaries? I pick them pretty carefully, I can tell you.

Mr. Hergesheimer: I shall write a novel to be published after my death. There was Henry

Adams. He stipulated that *The Education of Henry Adams* should not be published until after his death; and everybody says it is positively brilliant.

Mr. FOLLETT (*relieved*): That is a wise decision. But don't be disheartened. I'll probably be able to get around to you in ten years, anyway. (*Mr. Hergesheimer bows and retires.*)

CLERK PHELPS: John Galsworthy!

Mr. FOLLETT (*brightening*): Some of the Englishmen! This is better! Besides, I know all about Galsworthy.

Mr. GALSWORTHY (*coming forward*): I feel much honored.

COUNSEL FOR THE PROSECUTION: If the court please, I must state that for some time now Mr. Galsworthy has been published serially in a magazine with a circulation of one digit and six ciphers. Or one cipher and six digits, I cannot remember which.

Mr. BROWNELL: What, six? Then he has more readers than can be counted on the fingers of one hand. There are only five fingers on a hand. I think this is conclusive.

Mr. BOYNTON: Oh, decidedly.

Mr. FOLLETT: But I put him in my book on modern novelists, all of whom were hand picked.

Mr. GALSWORTHY (*with much calmness for one uttering a terrible heresy*): Perhaps that's the diffi-

culty, really. All hand picked. Do you know, I rather believe in literary windfalls. But I beg to withdraw. (*And he does.*)

The Clerk: Herbert George Wells!

Mr. Wells (*sauntering up and speaking with a certain inattention*): Respecting my long novel, *Joan and Peter,* there are some points that need to be made clear. Peter, you know, is called Petah by Joan. Petah is a sapient fellow. He is even able to admire the Germans because, after all, they knew where they were going, they knew what they were after, their education had them headed for something. It had, indeed. I think Petah overlooks the fact that it had headed them for Paris in 1914.

The point that Oswald and I make in the book is that England and the Empire, in 1914 and prior thereto, had not been headed for anything, educationally or otherwise, except Littleness in every field of political endeavor, except Stupidity in every province of human affairs. And the proof of this, we argue, is found in the first three years of the Great War. No doubt. The first three years of the war prove so many things that this may well be among them; don't you think so?

Without detracting from the damning case which Oswald and I make out against England it does occur to me, as I poke over my material for a new book, that as the proof of a pudding is in the eat-

ing so the proof of a nation at war is in the fighting. Indisputable as the bankruptcy of much British leadership has been, indisputable as it is that General Gough lost tens of thousands of prisoners, hundreds of guns and vast stores of ammunition, it is equally indisputable that the Australians who died like flies at the Dardanelles died like men, that the Tommies who were shot by their own guns at Neuve Chapelle went forward like heroes, that the undersized and undernourished and unintellectual Londoners from Whitechapel who fell in Flanders gave up their immortal souls like freemen and Englishmen and kinsmen of the Lion Heart.

And if it comes to a question as to the blame for the war as distinguished from the question as to the blame for the British conduct of the war, the latter being that with which *Joan and Peter* is almost wholly concerned, I should like to point out now, on behalf of myself and the readers of my next book, that perhaps I am not entirely blameless. Perhaps I bear an infinitesimal portion of the terrible responsibility which I have showed some unwillingness to place entirely and clearly on Germany.

For after all, it was Science that made the war and that waged it; it was the idolatry of Science that had transformed the German nation by transforming the German nature. It was the proofs of what Science could do that convinced Prussia of her

power, that made her confident that with this new weapon she could overstride the earth. I had a part in setting up that worship of Science. I have been not only one of its prophets but a high priest in its temple.

And I am all the more dismayed, therefore, when I find myself, as in *Joan and Peter,* still kneeling at the shrine. What is the cure for war? I ask. Petah tells us that our energies must have some other outlet. We must explore the poles and dig through the earth to China. He himself will go back to Cambridge and get a medical degree; and if he is good enough he'll do something on the border line between biology and chemistry. Joan will build model houses. And the really curious thing is that the pair of them seem disposed to run the unspeakable risks of trying to educate still another generation, a generation which, should it have to fight a war with a conquering horde from Mars, might blame Peter and Joan severely for the sacrifices involved, just as *they* blame the old Victorians for the sacrifice of 1914-1918.

Mr. Howells: In heaven's name, what is this tirade?

Mr. Brownell: Mr. Wells is merely writing his next book, that's all.

(*As it is impossible to stop Mr. Wells the court adjourns without a day.*)

BOOK "REVIEWING"

IV

BOOK "REVIEWING"

ON the subject of *Book "Reviewing"* we feel we can speak freely, knowing all about the business, as we do, though by no means a practitioner, and having no convictions on the score of it. For we point with pride to the fact that, though many times indicted, a conviction has never been secured against us. However, it isn't considered good form (whatever that is) to talk about your own crimes. For instance, after exhausting the weather, you should say pleasantly to your neighbor: "What an interesting burglary you committed last night! We were all quite stirred up!" It is almost improper (much worse than merely immoral) to exhibit your natural egoism by remarking: "If I do say it, that murder I did on Tuesday was a particularly good job!"

For this reason, if for no other, we would refrain, ordinarily, from talking about book "reviewing"; but since Robert Cortes Holliday has mentioned the subject in his *Walking-Stick Papers* and thus introduced the indelicate topic once and for all, there really seems no course open but to pick

up the theme and treat it in a serious, thoughtful way.

2

Book reviewing is so called because the books are not reviewed, or viewed (some say not even read). They are described with more or less accuracy and at a variable length. They are praised, condemned, weighed and solved by the use of logarithms. They are read, digested, quoted and tested for butter fat. They are examined, evalued, enjoyed and assessed; criticised, and frequently found fault with (not the same thing, of course); chronicled and even orchestrated by the few who never write words without writing both words and music. James Huneker could make Irvin Cobb sound like a performance by the Boston Symphony. Others, like Benjamin De Casseres, have a dramatic gift. Mr. De Casseres writes book revues.

3

Any one can review a book and every one should be encouraged to do it. It is unskilled labor. Good book reviewers earn from $150 to $230 a week, working only in their spare time, like the good-looking young men and women who sell the *Saturday Evening Post,* the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Country Gentleman* but who seldom earn

over $100 a week. Book reviewing is one of the very few subjects not taught by the correspondence schools, simply because there is nothing to teach. It is so simple a child can operate it with perfect safety. Write for circular giving full particulars and our handy phrasebook listing 2,567 standard phrases indispensable to any reviewer—FREE.

In reviewing a book there is no method to be followed. Like one of the playerpianos, you shut the doors (i.e., close the covers) and play (or write) *by instinct!* Although no directions are necessary we will suggest a few things to overcome the beginner's utterly irrational sense of helplessness.

One of the most useful comments in dealing with very scholarly volumes, such as *A History of the Statistical Process in Modern Philanthropical Enterprises* by Jacob Jones, is as follows: "Mr. Jones's work shows signs of haste." The peculiar advantage of this is that you do not libel Mr. Jones; the haste may have been the printer's or the publisher's or almost anybody's but the postoffice's. In the case of a piece of light fiction the best way to start your review is by saying: "A new book from the pen of Alice Apostrophe is always welcome." But suppose the book is a first book? One of the finest opening sentences for the review of a first book runs: "For a first novel, George Lamplit's *Good Gracious!* is a tale of distinct promise." Be care-

ful to say "distinct"; it is an adjective that fits perfectly over the shoulders of any average-chested noun. It gives the noun that upright, swagger carriage a careful writer likes his nouns to have.

4

But clothes do not make the man and words do not make the book review. A book review must have a Structure, a Skeleton, if it be no more than the skeleton in the book closet. It must have a backbone and a bite. It must be able to stand erect and look the author in the face and tell him to go to the Home for Indigent Authors which the Authors' League will build one of these days after it has met running expenses.

Our favorite book reviewer reviews the ordinary book in four lines and a semi-colon. Unusual books drain his vital energy to the extent of a paragraph and a half, three adjectives to the square inch.

He makes it a point to have one commendatory phrase and one derogatory phrase, which gives a nicely balanced, "on the one hand . . . on the other hand" effect. He says that the book is attractively bound but badly printed; well-written but deficient in emotional intensity; full of action but weak in characterization; has a good plot but is devoid of style.

He reads all the books he reviews. Every little while he pounces upon a misquotation on page 438, or a misprint on page 279. Reviewers who do not read the books they review may chance upon such details while idly turning the uncut leaves or while looking at the back cover, but they never bring in three runs on the other side's error. They spot the fact that the heroine's mother, who was killed in a train accident in the fourth chapter, buys a refrigerator in the twenty-third chapter, and they indulge in an unpardonable witticism as to the heroine's mother's whereabouts after her demise. But the wrong accent on the Greek word in Chapter XVII gets by them; and as for the psychological impulse which led the hero to jump from Brooklyn Bridge on the Fourth of July they miss it entirely and betray their neglect of their duty by alluding to him as a poor devil crazed with the heat. The fact is, of course, that he did a Steve Brodie because he found something obscurely hateful in the Manhattan skyline. Day after day, while walking to his work on the Brooklyn Rapid Transit, he gazed at the saw-toothed outline of the buildings limned against the sky. Day by day his soul kept asking: "Why *don't* they get a gold filling for that cavity between the Singer and Woolworth towers?" And he would ask himself despondently: "Is this what I live for?" And gradually he felt that it was not. He felt that it might be something to

die about, however. And so, with the rashness of youth, he leaped. The George Meredith-Thomas Hardy irony came into the story when he was pulled out of the river by his rival in Dorinda's affections, Gregory Anthracyte, owner of the magnificent steam yacht *Chuggermugger*.

So much for the anatomy of a book review. Put backbone into it. Read before you write. Look before you leap. Be just, be fair, be impartial; and when you damn, damn with faint praise, and when you praise, praise with faint damns. Be all things to all books. Remember the author. Review as you would be reviewed by. If a book is nothing in your life it may be the fault of your life. And it is always less expensive to revise your life than to revise the book. Your life is not printed from plates that cost a fortune to make and another fortune to throw away. "Life is too short to read inferior books," eh? Books are too good to be guillotined by inferior lives—or inferior livers. Bacon said some books were to be digested, but he neglected to mention a cure for dyspeptics.

5

But when we say so much we have only touched the surface of a profound matter. The truth of that matter, the full depth of it, may as well be plumbed at once. A book cannot be reviewed. It

can only be written about or around. It is insusceptible of such handling as is accorded a play, for example.

A man with more or less experience in seeing plays and with more or less knowledge of the drama goes to the first performance of a new comedy or tragedy or whatnot. There it is before him in speech and motion and color. It is acted. The play, structurally, is good or bad; the acting is either good or bad. Every item of the performance is capable of being resolved separately and estimated; and the collective interest or importance of these items can be determined, is, in fact, determined once and for all by the performance itself. The observer gets their collective impact at once and his task is really nothing but a consideration afterward in such detail as he cares to enter upon of just how that impact was secured. Did you ever, in your algebra days, or even in your arithmetically earnest childhood, "factor" a quantity or a number? Take 91. A little difficult, 91, but after some mental and pencil investigation you found that it was obtained by multiplying 13 by 7. Very well. You knew how the impact of 91 was produced; it was produced by multiplying 13 by 7. You had reviewed the number 91 in the sense that you might review a play.

Now it is impossible to review a book as you would factor a number or a play. You can't be

sure of the factors that make up the collective impact of the book upon you. There's no way of getting at them. They are summed up in the book itself and no book can be split into multipliable parts. A book is not the author times an idea times the views of the publisher. A book is unfactorable, often undecipherable. It is a growth. It is a series of accretions about a central thought. The central thought is like the grain of sand which the oyster has pearled over. The central thought may even be a diseased thought and the pearl may be a very lovely and brilliant pearl, superficially at least, for all that. There is nothing to do with a book but to take it as it is or go at it hammer and tongs, scalpel and curette, chisel and auger—smashing it to pieces, scraping and cutting, boring and cleaving through the layers of words and subsidiary ideas and getting down eventually to the heart of it, to the grain of sand, the irritant thought that was the earliest foundation.

Such surgery may be highly skilful or highly and wickedly destructive; it may uncover something worth while and it may not; naturally, you don't go in for much of it, if you are wise, and as a general thing you take a book as it is and not as it once was or as the author may, in the innocence of his heart or the subtlety of his experience, have intended it to be.

6

Surgery on a book is like surgery on a human being, for a book is alive; ordinarily the only justification for it is the chance of saving life. If the operator can save the author's life (as an author) by cutting he ought to go ahead, of course. The fate of one book is nothing as against the lives of books yet unwritten; the feelings of the author are not necessarily of more account than the screams of the sick child's parent. There have been such literary operations for which, in lieu of the $1,000 fee of medical practise, the surgeon has been rewarded and more than repaid by a private letter of acknowledgement and heartfelt thanks. No matter how hard up the recipient of such a letter may be, the missive seldom turns up in those auction rooms where the A. L. S. (or Autograph Letter with Signature) sometimes brings an unexpected and astonishingly large price.

7

There is a good deal to be said for taking a book as it is. Most books, in fact, should be taken that way. For the number of books which contain within them issues of life and death is always very small. You may handle new books for a year and come upon only one such. And when you do, un-

less you recognize its momentousness, no responsibility rests on *you* to do anything except follow a routine procedure. In this domain ignorance is a wholly valid excuse; no one would think of blaming a general practitioner of medicine for not removing the patient's vermiform appendix on principle, so to say. Unless he apprehended conclusively that the man had appendicitis and unless he knew the technique of the operation he would certainly be blamed for performing it. Similarly, unless the handler of new books is dead sure that a fatality threatens Harold Bell Wright or John Galsworthy or Mary Roberts Rinehart, unless the new book of Mr. Wright or Mr. Galsworthy or Mrs. Rinehart is a recognizable and unmistakable symptom, unless, further, he knows what to uncover in that book and how to uncover it, he has no business to take the matter in hand at all. Though the way of most "reviewers" with new books suggests that their fundamental motto must be that one good botch deserves another.

Not at all. Better, if you don't know what to do, to leave bad enough alone.

But since the book as it is forms 99 percent. of the subject under consideration this aspect of dealing with new books should be considered first and most extensively. Afterward we can revert to the one percent. of books that require to go under the knife.

8

Now the secret of taking a book as it is was never very abstruse and is always perfectly simple; nevertheless, it seems utterly to elude most of the persons who deal with new books. It is a secret only because it is forever hidden from their eyes. Or maybe they deliberately look the other way.

There exists in the world as at present constituted a person called the reporter. He is, mostly, an adjunct of the daily newspaper; in small places, of the weekly newspaper. It is, however, in the cities of America that he is brought to his perfection and in this connection it is worth while pointing out what Irvin Cobb has already noted—the difference between the New York reporter and the reporter of almost any other city in America. The New York reporter "works with" his rival on another sheet; the reporter outside New York almost never does this. Cobb attributed the difference to the impossible tasks that confront reporters in New York, impossible, that is, for single-handed accomplishment. A man who should attempt to cover alone some New York assignments, to "beat" his fellow, would be lost. Of course where a New York paper details half a dozen men to a job real competition between rival outfits is feasible and sometimes occurs. But the point here is this: The New York reporter, by generally "working with"

his fellow from another daily, has made of his work a profession, with professional ideals and standards, a code, unwritten but delicate and decidedly high rules of what is honorable and what is not. Elsewhere reporting remains a business, decently conducted to be sure, open in many instances to manifestations of chivalry; but essentially keen, sharp-edged, cut-throat competition.

Now it is of the reporter in his best and highest estate that we would speak here—the reporter who is not only a keen and honest observer but a happy recorder of what he sees and hears and a professional person with ethical ideals in no respect inferior to those of any recognized professional man on earth.

There are many things which such a reporter will not do under any pressure of circumstance or at the beck of any promise of reward. He will not distort the facts, he will not suppress them, he will not put in people's mouths words that they did not say and he will not let the reader take their words at face value if, in the reporter's own knowledge, the utterance should be perceptibly discounted. No reporter can see and hear everything and no reporter's story can record even everything that the observer contrived to see and hear. It must record such things as will arouse in the reader's mind a correct image and a just impression.

How is this to be done? Why, there is no

formula. There's no set of rules. There's nothing but a purpose animating every word the man writes, a purpose served, and only half-consciously served, by a thousand turns of expression, a thousand choices of words. Like all honest endeavors to effect a purpose the thing is spoiled, annulled, made empty of result by deliberate art. Good reporters are neither born nor made; they evolve themselves and without much help from any outside agency, either. They can be hindered but not prevented, helped but not hurt. You may remember a saying that God helps those who help themselves. The common interpretation of this is that when a man gets up and does something of his own initiative Providence is pretty likely to play into his hands a little; not at all, that isn't what the proverb means. What it does mean is just this: That those who help themselves, who really do lift themselves by their bootstraps, are helped by God; that it isn't they who do the lifting but somebody bigger than themselves. Now there is no doubt whatever that good reporters are good reporters because God makes them so. They aren't good reporters at three years of age; they get to be. Does this seem discouraging? It ought to be immensely encouraging, heartening, actually "uplifting" in the finest sense of a tormented word. For if we believed that good reporters were born and not made there would be no hope for any except the gifted few,

endowed from the start; and if we believed that good reporters were made and not born there would be absolutely no excuse for any failures whatever —every one should be potentially a good reporter and it would be simply a matter of correct training. But if we believe that a good reporter is neither born nor made, but makes himself with the aid of God we can be unqualifiedly cheerful. There is hope for almost any one under such a dispensation; moreover, if we believe in God at all and in mankind at all we must believe that between God and mankind the supply of topnotch reporters will never entirely fail. The two together will come pretty nearly meeting the demand every day in the year.

9

Perhaps the reader is grumbling, in fact, we seem to hear murmurs. What has all this about the genesis and nature of good reporters to do with the publication of new books? Why, this: The only person who can deal adequately and amply with 99 new books out of a hundred—the 99 that require to be taken as they are—is the good reporter. He's the boy who can read the new book as he would look and listen at a political convention, or hop around at a fire—getting the facts, getting them straight (yes, indeed, they do get them straight) and setting them down, swiftly and se-

lectively, to reproduce in the mind of the public the precise effect of the book itself. The effect—not the means by which it was achieved, not the desirability of it having been achieved, not the artistic quality of it, not the moral worth of it, not anything in the way of a corollary or lesson or a deduction, however obvious—just the effect. That's reporting. That's getting and giving the news. And that's what the public wants.

Some people seem to think there is something shameful in giving the public what it wants. They would, one supposes, highly commend the grocer who gave his customer something "just as good" or (according to the grocer) "decidedly better." But substitution, open or concealed, is an immoral practice. Nothing can justify it, no nobility of intention can take it out of the class of deception and cheating.

But, they cry, the public does not want what is sufficiently good, let alone what is best for it; that is why it is wrong to give the public what it wants. So they shift their ground and think to escape on a high moral plateau or table land. But the table land is a tip-table land. What they mean is that they are confidently setting their judgment of what the public ought to want against the public's plain decision what it does want. They are a few dozens against many millions, yet in their few dozen intelligences is collected more wisdom than has been

the age-long and cumulative inheritance of all the other sons of earth. They really believe that. . . . Pitiable . . .

10

A new book is news. This might almost be set down as axiomatic and not as a proposition needing formal demonstration by the Euclidean process. Yet it is susceptible of such demonstration and we shall demonstrate accordingly.

In the strict sense, anything that happens is news. Everybody remembers the old distinction, that if a dog bites a man it is very likely not news, but that if a man bites a dog it is news beyond all cavil. Such a generalization is useful and fairly harmless (like the generalization we ourselves have just indulged in and are about proving) if—a big if—the broad exception be noted. If a dog bites John D. Rockefeller, Jr., it is not only news but rather more important, or certainly more interesting, news than if John Jones of Howlersville bites a dog. For the chances are that John Jones of Howlersville is a poor demented creature, after all. Now the dog that bites Mr. Rockefeller is very likely a poor, demented creature, too; but the distinction lies in this: the dog bitten by John Jones is almost certainly not as well-known or as interesting or as important in the lives of a number of people as

Mr. Rockefeller. Pair off the cur that puts his teeth in the Rockefeller ankle, if you like, with the wretch who puts his teeth in an innocent canine bystander (it's the innocent bystander who always gets hurt); do this and you still have to match up the hound of Howlersville with Mr. Rockefeller. And the scale of news values tips heavily away from Howlersville and in the direction of 26 Broadway.

So it is plain that not all that happens is news compared with some that happens. The law of specific interest, an intellectual counterpart of the law of specific gravity in the physical world, rules in the world of events. Any one handling news who disregards this law does so at his extreme peril, just as any one building a ship heavier than the water it displaces may reasonably expect to see his fine craft sink without a trace.

Since a new book is a thing happening it is news, subject to the broad correction we have been discussing above, namely, that in comparison with other new books it may not be news at all, its specific interest may be so slight as to be negligible entirely.

But if a particular new book *is* news, if its specific interest is moderately great, then obviously, we think, the person best fitted to deal with it is a person trained to deal with news, namely, a reporter. Naturally we all prefer a good reporter.

II

The question will at once be raised: How is the specific interest of a new book to be determined? We answer: Just as the specific interest of any kind of potential news or actual news is determined—in competition with the other news of the day and hour. What is news one day isn't news another. This is a phenomenon of which the regular reader of every daily paper is more or less consciously aware. There are some days when "there's no news in the paper." There are other days when the news in the paper is so big and so important that all the lesser occurrences which ordinarily get themselves chronicled are crowded out. Granting a white paper supply which does not at present exist, it would, of course, be possible on the "big days" to record all these lesser doings; and consistently, day in and day out, to print nicely proportioned accounts of every event attaining to a certain fixed level of specific interest. But the reader who may think he would like this would speedily find out that he didn't. Some days he would have a twelve page newspaper and other days (not Sundays, either) he would have one of thirty-six pages. He would be lost, or rather, his attention would be lost in the jungle of events that all happened within twenty-four hours, with the profuse luxuriance of tropical vegetation shooting

up skyward by inches and feet overnight. His natural appetite for a knowledge of what his fellows were doing would be alternately starved and overfed; malnutrition would lead to chronic and incurable dyspepsia; soon he would become a hateful misanthrope, shunning his fellow men and having a seizure every time Mr. Hearst brought out the eighth edition (which is the earliest and first) of the New York *Evening Journal.* It is really dreadful to think what havoc a literal adhesion to the motto of the New York *Times*—"All the news that's fit to print"—would work in New York City.

No mortal has more than a certain amount of time daily and a certain amount of attention (according to his mental habit and personal interest) to bestow on the perusal of a newspaper, or news, or the printed page of whatever kind. On Sunday he has much more, it is likely, but still there is a limit and a perfectly finite bound. Consequently the whole problem for the persons engaged in gathering and preparing news for presentation to readers sums up in this: "How many of the day's doings attaining or exceeding a certain level of public interest and importance, shall we set before our clients?" Easily answered, in most cases; and the size of the paper is the index of the answer. Question Two: *"What* of the day's doings shall be served up in the determined space?"

For this question there is never an absolute or

ready answer, and there never can be. On some of the affairs to be reported all journalists would agree; but they would differ in their estimates of the relative worth of even these and the lengths at which they should be treated; about lesser occurrences there would be no fixed percentage of agreement.

12

Now the application of all this to the business of giving the news of books should be fairly clear. A new book is news—and so, sometimes, is an old one, rediscovered. Since a new book is news it should be dealt with by a news reporter. Not all that happens is news; not all the new books published are news; new books, like new events of all sorts, are news when they compete successfully with a majority of their kind.

There is no more sense in *reporting*—that is, describing individually at greater or less length—all the new books than there would be in reporting every incident on the police blotters of a lively American city. *Recording* new books is another matter; somewhere, somehow, most occurrences in this world get recorded in written words that reach nearly all who are interested in the happenings (as in letters) or are accessible to the interested few (as the police records). The difference between the reporter and the recorder is not entirely a difference

of details given. The recorder usually follows a prescribed formula and makes his record conform thereto; the good reporter never has a formula and never can have one. Let us see how this works out with the news of books.

13

The recorder of new books generally compiles a list of *Books Received* or *Books Just Published* and he does it in this uninspired and conscientious manner:

IN THE HEART OF A FOOL. By William Allen White. A story of Kansas in the last half-century, centered in a single town, showing its evolution from prairie to an industrial city with difficult economic and labor problems; the story told in the lives of a group of people, pioneers and the sons of pioneers—their work, ambitions, personal affairs, &c. New York: The Macmillan Company. $1.60.

That would be under the heading *Fiction.* An entry under the heading *Literary Studies* or *Essays* might read:

OUR POETS OF TO-DAY. By Howard Willard Cook. Volume II. in a series of books on modern American writers. Sketches of sixty-eight American poets, nearly all living, in-

cluding Edgar Lee Masters, Amy Lowell, Witter Bynner, Robert Service, Edgar Guest, Charles Divine, Carl Sandburg, Joyce Kilmer, Sara Teasdale, George Edward Woodberry, Percy Mackaye, Harriet W. Monroe, &c. New York: Moffat, Yard & Co. $1.60.

These we hasten to say would be unusually full and satisfactory records, but they would be records just the same—formal and precise statements of events, like the chronological facts affixed to dates in an almanac. If all records were like these there would be less objection to them; but it is an astonishing truth that most records are badly kept. Why, one may never fathom; since the very formality and precision make a good record easy. Yet almost any of the principal pages or magazines in the United States devoted to the news of new books is likely to make a record on this order:

IN THE HEART OF A FOOL. By William Allen White. Novel of contemporary American life. New York, &c.

Such a record is, of course, worse than inadequate; it is actually misleading. Mr. White's book happens to cover a period of fifty years. "Contemporary American life" would characterize quite as well, or quite as badly, a story of New York and Tuxedo by Robert W. Chambers.

14

The reporter works in entirely another manner. He is concerned to present the facts about a new book in a way sufficiently arresting and entertaining to engage the reader. As Mr. Holliday says with fine perception, the true function of the describer of new books is simply to bring a particular volume to the attention of its proper public. To do that it is absolutely necessary to "give the book," at least to the extent of enabling the reader of the article to determine, with reasonable accuracy (1) whether the book is for him, that is, addressed to a public of which he is one, and (2) whether he wants to read it or not.

Whether the book is good or bad is not the point. A man interested in sociology may conceivably want to read a book on sociology even though it is an exceedingly bad book on that subject and even though he knows its worthlessness. He may want to profit by the author's mistakes; he may want to write a book to correct them; or he may merely want to be amused at the spectacle of a fellow sociologist making a fool of himself, a spectacle by no means rare but hardly ever without a capacity for giving joy to the mildly malicious.

The determination of the goodness or badness of a book is not and should not be a deliberate purpose of the good book reporter. Why? Well,

in many cases it is a task of supererogation. Take a reporter who goes to cover a public meeting at which speeches are made. He does not find it necessary to say that Mr. So-and-So's speech was good. He records what Mr. So-and-So says, or a fair sample of it; which is enough. The reader can see for himself how good or bad it was and reach a conclusion based on the facts as tempered by his personal beliefs, tastes and ideas.

In the same way, it is superfluous for the book reporter to say that Miss Such-and-Such's book on New York is rotten. All he need do is to set down the incredible fact that Miss Such-and-Such locates the Woolworth building at Broadway, Fifth Avenue and Twenty-third street, and refers to the Aquarium as the fisheries section of the Bronx Zoo. If this should not appear a sufficient notice of the horrible nature of the volume the reporter may very properly give the truth about the Woolworth building and the Aquarium for the benefit of people who have never visited New York and might be unable to detect Miss Such-and-Such's idiosyncrasies.

The rule holds in less tangible matters. Why should the book reporter ask his reader to accept his dictum that the literary style of a writer is atrocious when he can easily prove it by a few sentences or a paragraph from the book?

15

Yet books are still in the main "reviewed," instead of being given into the hands of trained news reporters. Anything worse than the average book "review" it would certainly be difficult to find in the length and breadth of America. And England, despite the possession of some brilliant talents, is nearly as badly off.

No one who is not qualified as a critic should attempt to criticise new books.

There are but few critics in any generation—half a dozen or perhaps a dozen men in any single one of the larger countries are all who could qualify at a given time; that much seems evident. What is a critic? A critic is a person with an education unusually wide either in life or in letters, and preferably in both. He is a person with huge backgrounds. He has read thousands of books and has by one means or another abstracted the essence of thousands more. He has perhaps travelled a good deal, though this is not essential; but he has certainly lived with a most peculiar and exceptional intensity, descending to greater emotional and intellectual depths than the majority of mankind and scaling higher summits; he has, in some degree, the faculty of living other people's lives and sharing their human experiences which is the faculty that, in a transcendant degree, belongs

to the novelist and storyteller. A critic knows the past and the present so well that he is able to erect standards, or uncover old standards, by which he can and does measure the worth of everything that comes before him. He can actually show you, in exact and inescapable detail, how De Morgan compares with Dickens and how Gilbert K. Chesterton ranks with Swift and whether Thackeray learned more from Fielding or from Daniel Defoe and he can trace the relation between a period in the life of Joseph Conrad and certain scenes and settings in *The Arrow of Gold.*

Such a man is a critic. Of course critics make mistakes but they are not mistakes of ignorance, of personal unfitness for the task, of pretension to a knowledge they haven't. They are mistakes of judgment; such mistakes as very eminent jurists sometimes make after years on the bench. The jurist is reversed by the higher court and the critic is reversed by the appellate decree of the future.

The mistakes of a real critic, like the mistakes of a real jurist, are always made on defensible, and sometimes very sound, grounds; they are reasoned and seasoned conclusions even if they are not the correct conclusions. The mistakes of the 9,763 persons who assume the critical ermine without any fitness to wear it are quite another matter; and they are just the mistakes that would be made by a layman sitting in the jurist's seat. The

jurist knows the precedents, the rules of evidence, the law; he is tolerant and admits exceptions into the record. So the critic; with the difference that the true critic merely presides and leaves the verdict to that great jury of true and right instincts which we call "the public." The genuine critic is concerned chiefly to see that the case gets before the jury cleanly. Without presuming to tell the jury what its verdict must be—except in extraordinary circumstances—he does instruct it what the verdict should be on, what should be considered in arriving at it, what principles should guide the decision.

But the near-critic (God save the mark!) has it in his mind that he must play judge and jury too. He doesn't like the writer's style, or thinks the plot is poor, or this bad or that defective. Instead of carefully outlining the evidence on which the public might reach a correct verdict on these points he delivers a dictum. It doesn't go, of course, at least for long; and it never will.

Let us be as specific as is possible in this, as specific, that is, as a general discussion can be and remain widely applicable.

I don't like the writer's style. I am not a person of critical equipment or pretensions. I am, we will say, a book reporter. I do not declare, with a fiat and a flourish, that the style is bad; I merely present a chunk of it. There is the evidence, and nothing else is so competent, so relevant or so ma-

terial, as the lawyers would say. I may, in the necessity to be brief and the absence of space for an excerpt, say that the style is adjectival, or adverbial, or diffuse, or involved or florid or something of that sort, *if I know it to be.* These would be statements of fact. "Bad" is a statement of opinion.

I may call the plot "weak" if it is weak (a fact) and if I know weakness in a plot (which qualifies me to announce the fact). But if I call the plot "poor" I am taking a good deal upon myself. Its poorness is a matter of opinion. Some stories are spoiled by a strong plot which dominates the reader's interest almost to the exclusion of other things—fine characterization, atmosphere, and so on.

And even restrictions of space can hardly excuse the lack of courtesy, or worse, shown by the near-critic who calls the plot weak or the style diffuse or involved, however much these may be facts, and who does not at least briefly explain in what way the style is diffuse (or involved) and wherein the weakness of the plot resides. But to put a finger on the how or the where or the why requires a knowledge and an insight that the near-critic does not possess and will not take the trouble to acquire; so we are asking him to do the impossible. Nevertheless we can ask him to do the possible; and that is to leave off talking or writing on matters he knows nothing about.

16

The task of training good book reporters is not a thing to be easily and lightly undertaken. And the first essential in the making of such a reporter is the inculcation of a considerable humility of mind. A near-critic can afford to think he knows it all, but a book reporter cannot. Besides a sense of his own limitations the book reporter must possess and develop afresh from time to time a mental attitude which may best be summed up in this distinction: When a piece of writing seems to him defective he must stop short and ask himself, "Is this defect a fact or is it my personal feeling?" If it is a fact he must establish it to his own, and then to the reader's, satisfaction. If it is his personal impression or feeling, merely, as he may conclude on maturer reflection, he owes it to those who will read his article either not to record it or to record it as a personal thing. There is no sense in saying only the good things that can be said about a book that has bad things in it. Such a course is dishonest. It is equally dishonest, and infinitely more common, to pass off private opinions as statements of fact.

When in doubt, the doubt should be resolved in favor of the author. A good working test of fact versus personal opinion is this: If you, as a reporter, cannot put your finger on the apparent

flaw, cannot give the how or where or why of the thing that seems wrong, it must be treated as your personal feeling. A fact that you cannot buttress might as well not be a fact at all—unless, of course, it is self-evident, in which case you have only to state it or exhibit your evidence to command a universal assent.

All that we have been saying respecting the fact or fancy of a flaw in a piece of writing applies with equal force, naturally, to the favorable as well as the unfavorable conclusion you, as a book reporter, may reach. Because a story strikes you as wonderful it does not follow that it is wonderful. You are under a moral obligation, at least, to establish the wonder of it. The procedure for the book reporter who has to describe favorably and for the book reporter who has to report unfavorably is the same. First comes the question of fact, then the citation, if possible, of evidence; and if that be impossible the brief indication of the how, the where, the why of the merit reported. If the meritoriousness remains a matter of personal impression it ought so to be characterized but may warrantably be recorded where an adverse impression would go unmentioned. The presumption is in favor of the author. It should be kept so.

17

In all this there is nothing impossible, nothing millennial. But what has been outlined of the work of the true book reporter is as far as possible from what we very generally get to-day. We get unthinking praise and unthinking condemnation; we do not expect analysis but we have a right to expect straightaway exposition and a condensed transliteration of the book being dealt with.

"Praise," we have just said, and "condemnation." That is what it is, and there is no room in the book reporter's task either for praise or condemnation. He is not there to praise the book any more than a man is at a political convention to praise a nominating speech; he is there to describe the book, to describe the speech, to *report* either. A newspaperman who should begin his account of a meeting in this fashion, "In a lamentably poor speech, showing evidences of hasty preparation, Elihu Root," &c., would be fired—and ought to be. No matter if a majority of those who heard Mr. Root thought the same way about it.

18

The book reporter will be governed in his work by the precise news value in the book he is dealing

with at the moment he is dealing with it. This needs illustration.

On November 11, 1918, an armistice was concluded in Europe, terminating a war that had lasted over four years. In that four years books relating to the war then being waged had sold heavily, even at times outselling fiction. Had the war drawn to a gradual end the sales of these war books would probably have lessened, little by little, until they reached and maintained a fairly steady level. From this they would doubtless have declined, as the end drew near, lower and lower, until the foreseen end came, when the interest in them would have been as great, but not much greater, than the normal interest in works of a historical or biographical sort.

But the end came overnight; and suddenly the whole face of the world was transformed. The reaction in the normal person was intense. In an instant war books of several pronounced types became intolerable reading. *How I Reacted to the War* by Quintus Quintuple seemed tremendously unimportant. Even *Mr. Britling* was, momentarily, utterly stale and out of date. Reminiscences of the German ex-Kaiser were neither interesting nor important; he was a fugitive in Holland.

The book reporter who had any sense of news values grasped this immediately. Books that a month earlier would have been worth 1,000 to

1,500 word articles were worth a few lines or no space at all. On the other hand books which had a historical value and a place as interesting public records, such as *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story,* were not diminished either in interest or in importance.

Some books which had been inconsequential were correspondingly exalted by the unprecedented turn of affairs. These were books on such subjects as the re-education of disabled fighters, the principles which might underlie the formation of a league of nations, problems of reconstruction of every sort. They had been worth, some of them, very small articles a week earlier; now they were worth a column or two apiece.

19

No doubt we ought to conclude this possibly tedious essay with some observations on the one per cent. of books which call for swift surgery. But such an enterprise is, if not impossible, extraordinarily difficult for the reason that the same operation is never called for twice.

In a sense it is like cutting diamonds, or splitting a large stone into smaller stones. The problem varies each time. The cutter respects certain principles and follows a careful technique. That is all.

We shall, for the sake of the curious, take an

actual instance. In 1918 there was published a novel called *Foes* by Mary Johnston, an American novelist of an endowment so decided as fairly to entitle her to the designation "a genius."

Miss Johnston's first novel had appeared twenty years earlier. Her first four books—nay, her first two, the second being *To Have and to Hold*—placed her firmly in the front rank of living romantic writers. The thing that distinguished her romanticism was its sense of drama in human affairs and human destiny. Added to this was a command of live, nervous, highly poetic prose. History—romance; it did not matter. She could set either movingly before you.

Her work showed steady progress, reaching a sustained culmination in her two Civil War novels, *The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing.* She experimented a little, as in her poetic drama of the French Revolution, *The Goddess of Reason,* and in *The Fortunes of Garin,* a tapestry of mediæval France. *The Wanderers* was a more decided venture, but a perfectly successful. Then came *Foes.*

Considered purely as a romantic narrative, as a story of friendship transformed into hatred and the pursuit of a private feud under the guise of wreaking Divine vengeance, *Foes* is a superb tale. Considered as a novel, *Foes* is a terrible failure.

Why? Is it not sufficient to write a superb tale? Yes, if you have essayed nothing more. Is a novel

anything more than "a good story, well told"? Yes, if the writer essays to make more of it.

The novelist who has aimed at nothing beyond the "good story, well told" has a just grievance against any one who asks anything further. But against the novelist who has endeavored to make his story, however good, however well told, the vehicle for a human philosophy or a metaphysical speculation, the reader has a just grievance—if the endeavor has been unsuccessful or if the philosophy is unsound.

Now as to the soundness or unsoundness of a particular philosophy every reader must pronounce for himself. The metaphysical idea which was the basis of Miss Johnston's novel was this: All gods are one. All deities are one. Christ, Buddha; it matters not. "There swam upon him another great perspective. He saw Christ in light, Buddha in light. The glorified—the unified. *Union.*" Upon this idea Miss Johnston reconciles her two foes.

This perfectly comprehensible mystical conception is the rock on which the whole story is founded —and the rock on which it goes to pieces. It will be seen at once that the conception is one which no Christian can entertain and remain a Christian —nor any Buddhist, and remain a Buddhist, either. To the vast majority of mankind, therefore, the philosophy of *Foes* was unsound and the novel was

worthless except for the superficial incidents and the lovely prose in which they were recounted.

It might be thought that for those who accepted the mystical concept Miss Johnson imposed, *Foes* would have been a novel of the first rank. No, indeed; and for this reason:

Her piece of mysticism was supposed to be arrived at and embraced by a dour Scotchman of about the year of Our Lord 1750. It was supposed to transform the whole nature of that man so as to lead him to give over a life-long enmity in which he had looked upon himself as a Divine instrument to punish an evil-doer.

Now however reasonable or sound or inspiring and inspiriting the mystical idea may have seemed to any reader, he could not but be fatally aware that, as presented, the thing was a flat impossibility. Scotchmen of the year 1750 were Christians above all else. They were, if you like, savage Christians; some of them were irreligious, some of them were God-defying, none of them were Deists in the all-inclusive sense that Miss Johnston prescribes. The idea that Christ and Buddha might possibly be nothing but different manifestations of the Deity is an idea which could never have occurred to the eighteenth century Scotch mind—and never did. Least of all could it have occurred to such a man as Miss Johnston delineates in Alexander Jardine.

The thing is therefore utterly anachronistic. It

is a historical anachronism, if you like, the history here being the history of the human spirit in its religious aspects. Every reader of the book, no matter how willing he may have been to accept the novelist's underlying idea, was aware that the endeavor to convey it had utterly failed, was aware that Miss Johnston had simply projected *her* idea, *her* favorite bit of mysticism, into the mind of one of her characters, a Scotchman living a century and a half earlier! But the thoughts that one may think in the twentieth century while tramping the Virginia hills are not thoughts that could have dawned in the mind of a Scottish laird in the eighteenth century, not even though he lay in the flowering grass of the Roman Campagna.

. . . And so there, in *Foes,* we have the book in a hundred which called for something more than the intelligent and accurate work of the book reporter. Here was a case of a good novelist, and a very, very good one, gone utterly wrong. It was not sufficient to convey to the prospective reader a just idea of the story and of the qualities of it. It was necessary to cut and slash, as cleanly and as swiftly and as economically as possible—and as dispassionately—to the root of the trouble. For if Miss Johnston were to repeat this sort of performance her reputation would suffer, not to speak of her royalties; readers would be enraged or misled; young writers playing the sedulous ape would

inflict dreadful things upon us; tastes and tempers would be spoiled; publishers would lose money;—and, much the worst of all, the world would be deprived of the splendid work Mary Johnston could do while she was doing the exceedingly bad work she did do.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing about the blunder in *Foes* was the fact that there was no necessity for it. The Christian religion, which was the religion of Alexander Jardine, provides for reconciliation, indeed, it exacts it. There was the way for Miss Johnston to bring her foes together. Of course, it would not have been intellectually so exciting. But there is such a thing as emotional appeal, and it is not always base; there are emotions in the human so high and so lofty that it is wiser not to try to transcend them. . . .

The appearance of part of the foregoing in *Books and the Book World* of *The Sun,* New York, brought a letter from Kansas which should find a place in this volume. The letter, with the attempted answer, may as well be given here. The writer is head of the English department in a State college. He wrote:

20

"I hope that the mails lost for your college professors of English subscribers their copies of *Books*

and the Book World [containing the foregoing observations on *Book Reporting*]. . . . College professors do not like to be disturbed—and most of us cannot be, for that matter. The TNT in those pages was not meant for us, perhaps, but it should have been.

"When I read *Book Reporting* I dictated three pages of protest, but did not send it on—thanks to my better judgment. . . . Then I decided, since you had added so much to my perturbation, to ask you to help me.

"We need it out here—literary help only, of course. This is the only State college on what was once known as the 'Great Plains.' W. F. Cody won his sobriquet on Government land which is now our campus. Our students are the sons and daughters of pioneers who won over grasshoppers, droughts, hot winds and one crop farms. They are so near to real life that the teaching of literature must be as real as the literature—rather, it ought to be. That's where I want you to help me.

"I am not teaching literature here now as I was taught geology back in Missouri. That's as near as I shall tell you how I teach—it is bad enough and you might not help me if I did. (Perhaps, in fairness to you, I should say that for several years never less than one-third of those to whom we gave degrees have majored in English, and al-

ways as many as the next two departments combined.)

"Here's what I am tired of and want to get away from:

"1. Testing students on reading a book by asking fact questions about what is in the book—memory work, you see.

"2. Demanding of students a scholarship in the study of literature that is so academic that it is Prussian.

"3. Demanding that students serve time in literature classes as a means of measuring their advance in the study of literature.

"Here's what I want you to help me with in some definite concrete way: (Sounds like a college professor making an assignment—beg pardon.)

"1. Could you suggest a scheme of 'book reporting' for college students in literature classes? (An old book to a new person is news, isn't it?)

"2. Give me a list of books published during the last ten years that should be included in college English laboratory classes in literature. I want your list. I have my own, but fear it is too academic.

"3. What are some of the things which should enter into the training of teachers of high school English? Part of our work, especially in the summer, is to give such training to men and women

who will teach composition and literature in Kansas high schools.

"Your help will not only be appreciated, but it will be used."

21

To answer adequately these requests would take about six months' work and the answers would make a slender book. And then they would exhibit the defects inseparable from a one man response. None of which excuses a failure to attempt to answer, though it must extenuate failures in the attempt.

We shall try to answer, in this place, though necessarily without completeness. If nothing better than a few suggestions is the result, why—suggestions may be all that is really needed.

And first respecting the things our friend is tired of and wants to get away from:

1. Fact questions about what is in the book—memory work—are not much use if they stop with the outline of the story. What is *not* in the book may be more important than what is. Why did the author select this scene for narration and omit that other, intrinsically (it seems) the more dramatically interesting of the two? See *The Flirt,* by Booth Tarkington, where a double murder gets only a few lines and a small boy's doings occupy whole chapters.

2. Scholarship is less important than wide reading, though the two aren't mutually exclusive. A wide acquaintance doesn't preclude a few profoundly intimate friendships. Textual study has spoiled Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton for most of us. Fifty years hence Kipling and Masefield will be spoiled in the same way.

3. Time serving over literature is a waste of time. There are only three ways to teach literature. The first is by directing students to books for *voluntary* reading—hundreds of books, thousands. The second is by class lectures—entertaining, idea'd, anecdoted, catholic in range and expository in character. The third is by conversation—argumentative at times, analytic at moments, but mostly by way of exchanging information and opinions.

Study books as you study people. Mix among them. You don't take notes on people unless, perchance, in a diary. Keep a diary on books you read, if you like, but don't "take notes." Look for those qualities in books that you look for in people and make your acquaintances by the same (perhaps unformulated) rules. To read snobbishly is as bad as to practise snobbery among your fellows.

22

We go on to the first of our friend's requests for help. It is a scheme for "book reporting" for

college students in literature classes and he premises that an old book to a new reader is news. Of course it is.

Let the student take up a book that's new to him and read it by himself, afterward writing a report of it to be read to the class. When he comes to write his report he must keep in the forefront of his mind this one thing:

To tell the others accurately enough about that book so that each one of them will know whether or not *he* wants to read it.

That is all the book reporter ever tries for. No book is intended for everybody, but almost every book is intended for somebody. The problem of the book reporter is to find the reader.

Comparison may help. For instance, those who enjoy Milton's pastoral poetry will probably enjoy the long poem in Robert Nichols's *Ardours and Endurances.* Those who like Thackeray will like Mary S. Watts. Those who like Anna Katharine Green will thank you for sending them to *The Moonstone,* by one Wilkie Collins.

Most stories depend upon suspense in the action for their main effect. You must not "give away" the story so as to spoil it for the reader. In a mystery story you may state the mystery and appraise the solution or even characterize it—but you mustn't reveal it.

Tell 'em that Mr. Hergesheimer's *Java Head* is

an atmospheric marvel, but will disappoint many readers who put action first. Tell 'em that William Allen White writes (often) banally, but so saturates his novel with his own bigheartedness that he makes you laugh and cry. Tell 'em the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth as well as you can make it out—and for heaven's sake ask yourself with every assertion: "Is this a fact or is it my personal opinion?" *And a fact, for your purpose, will be an opinion in which a large majority of readers will concur.*

23

"Give me a list of books published during the last ten years that should be included in college English laboratory classes in literature. I want your list. I have my own, but fear it is too academic."

The following list is an offhand attempt to comply with this request. It is offered merely for the suggestions it may contain. If the ten year restriction is rigid we ask pardon for such titles as may be a little older than that. Strike them out.

For Kansans: Willa Sibert Cather's novels, *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia,* chronicling people and epochs of Kansas-Nebraska. William Allen White's *A Certain Rich Man* and *In the Heart of*

a Fool, less for their Kansas-ness than for their Americanism and humanity.

For Middle Westerners: Meredith Nicholson's *The Valley of Democracy.* Zona Gale's *Birth.* Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems.* Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology.* Vachel Lindsay's longer poems. Mary S. Watts's *Nathan Burke* and *Van Cleve: His Friends and His Family.* Lord Charnwood's life of Lincoln. William Dean Howells's *The Leatherwood God.* Booth Tarkington's *The Conquest of Canaan* (first published about fourteen years ago) and *The Magnificent Ambersons.* Gene Stratton-Porter's *A Daughter of the Land,* her *Freckles* and her *A Girl of the Limberlost.* One or two books by Harold Bell Wright. *The Passing of the Frontier,* by Emerson Hough, and other books in the Chronicles of America series published by the Yale University Press.

For Americans: Mary S. Watts's *The Rise of Jennie Cushing.* Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (if not barred under the ten year rule). Booth Tarkington's *The Flirt.* Novels with American settings by Gertrude Atherton and Stewart Edward White. Mary Johnston's *The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing.* Willa Sibert Cather's *The Song of the Lark.* Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome.* Alice Brown's *The Prisoner.* Ellen Glasgow's *The Deliverance.* Corra Harris's *A Circuit-Rider's Wife.* All of O. Henry. Margaret Deland's *The Iron Woman.* Earlier

novels by Winston Churchill. Ernest Poole's *The Harbor.* Joseph Hergesheimer's *The Three Black Pennys,* his *Gold and Iron* and his *Java Head.* Historical books by Theodore Roosevelt. American biographies too numerous to mention. *From Isolation to Leadership: A Review of American Foreign Policy* by Latané (published by the educational department of Doubleday, Page & Company). Essays, such as those of Agnes Repplier.

Each of these enumerations presupposes the books already named, or most of them. Don't treat them as pieces of literary workmanship. Many of them aren't. Those that have fine literary workmanship have something else, too—and it's the other thing, or things, that count. Fine art in a book is like good breeding in a person, a passport, not a Magna Charta. "Manners makyth man"—yah!

24

We are also asked:

"What are some of the things which should enter into the training of teachers of high school English?"

We reply:

A regard for literature, not as it reflects life, but as it moulds lives. A profound respect for an author who can find 100,000 readers, a respect at least equal to that entertained for an author who can

write superlatively well. For instance: Get it out of your head that you can afford to condescend toward a best seller, or to worship such a writer as Stevenson for his sheer craftsmanship.

An instinct for what will nourish the ordinary man or woman as keen as your perception of what will be relished by the fastidious reader. Don't insist that people must live on what you, or any one else, declare to be good for them. It is not for nothing that they "don't know anything about literature, *but know what they like.*"

A confidence in the greater wisdom of the greatest number. Tarkington got it right. The public wants the best it is capable of understanding; its understanding may not be the highest understanding, but "the writer who stoops to conquer doesn't conquer." Neither does the writer who never concedes anything. The public's standard can't always be wrong; the private standards can't always be right.

Arnold Bennett says, quite rightly, that the classics are made and kept alive by "the passionate few." But the business of high school teachers of English is not with the passionate few—who will look after themselves—but with the unimpassioned many. You can lead the student to Mr. Pope's Pierian spring, but you cannot make him drink. Unless you can show him, in the Missourian sense, it's all off. If you can't tell what it is a girl likes

in Grace S. Richmond how are you going to show her what she'll like in Dickens? Unless you know what it is that "they" get out of these books they *do* read you won't be able to bait the hook with the things you want them to read. Don't you think you've got a lot to learn yourself? And mightn't you do worse than sit down yourself and read attentively, at whatever personal cost, some of the best sellers?

It all goes back to the size of the teacher's share of our common humanity. A person who can't read a detective story for the sake of the thrills has no business teaching high school English. A person who is a literary snob is unfit to teach high school English. A person who can't sense (better yet, share) the common feeling about a popular writer and comprehend the basis of it and sympathize a little with it and express it more or less articulately in everyday speech is not qualified to teach high school English.

25

A word about writing "compositions" in high school English classes. Make 'em write stories instead. If they want to tackle thumbnail sketches or abstracter writing—little essays—why, let 'em. Abstractions in thought and writing are like the ocean—it's fatally easy to get beyond your depth,

and every one else's. Read what Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch says about this in his *Studies in Literature.* Once in a while a theologian urges us to "get back to the Bible." Well, there is one sense, at least, in which the world would do well to get back to the Bible, or to the Old Testament, at any rate. As Gardiner points out in his *The Bible as English Literature,* it was the fortune or misfortune of ancient Hebrew that it had no abstractions. Everything was stated in terms of the five senses. There was no such word as "virtue"; you said "sweet smellingness" or "pleasant tastingness" or something like that. And everybody knew what you meant. Whereas "virtue" means anything from personal chastity to a general meritoriousness that nobody can define. The Greeks introduced abstract thinking and expression and some Germans blighted the world by their abuse.

What should enter into the training of high school teachers of English? Only humbleness, sanity, catholicity of viewpoint, humor, a continual willingness to learn, a continuous faith in the people—and undying enthusiasm. Only these—and the love of books.

LITERARY EDITORS

BY ONE OF THEM

V

LITERARY EDITORS, BY ONE OF THEM

THE very term "literary editor" is a survival. It is meaningless, but we continue to use it because no better designation has been found, just as people in monarchical countries continue to speak of "King George" or "Queen Victoria of Spain." Besides, there is politeness to consider. No one wants to be the first to allude publicly and truthfully to "Figurehead George" or "Social Leader Victoria."

Literary editors who are literary are not editors, and literary editors who are editors are no longer literary. Of old there were scholarly, sarcastic men (delightful fellows, personally) who sat in cubbyholes and read unremittingly. Afterward, at night, they set down a few thoughtful, biting words about what they had read. These were printed. Publishers who perused them felt as if knives had been stuck in their backs. Booksellers who read them looked up to ask each other pathetically: "But what does it *mean?*" Book readers who read them resolved that the publication of a new book should

be, for them, the signal to read an old one. It was good for the secondhand trade.

We've changed all that, or, if we haven't, we're going to. Take a chap who runs what is called a "book section." This is a separate section or supplement forming part of a daily or Sunday newspaper. Its pages are magazine size—half the size of newspaper pages. They number from eight to twenty-eight, depending on the season and the advertising. The essential thing to realize about such a section is that it requires an editor to run it.

It does not require a literary man, or woman, at all. The editor of such a section need have no special education in the arts or letters. He must have judgment, of course, and if he has not some taste for literary matters he may not enjoy his work as he will if he has that taste. But highbrowism is fatal.

Can our editor "review" a book? Perhaps not. It is no matter. Maybe he knows a good review when he sees it, which will matter a good deal. Maybe he can get capable people to deal with the books for him. Which will matter more than anything else on earth in the handling of his book section.

A section will most certainly require, to run it, a man who can tell a good review (another word-survival) and who can get good reviewers. It

will require a man, or woman, with a sharp, clear and very broad viewpoint. Such exist. What do we mean—viewpoint?

The right conception, it seems to us, starts with the proposition that a new book is news (sometimes an old one is news too) and should be dealt with as such. Perhaps we are dealing only with a state of mind, in all this, but states of mind are important. They are the only states where self-determination is a sure thing. To get on:

Your literary editor is like unto a city editor, an individual whose desk is usually not so far away but that you can study him in his habitat. The city editor tries to distinguish the big news from the little news. The literary editor will wisely do the same. What is big news in the world of books? Well, a book that appears destined to be read as widely fifty years hence as it is to-day on publication is big news. And a book that will be read immediately by 100,000 people is bigger news. People who talk about news often overlook the ephemeral side of it. Much of the newsiness and importance of news resides in its transiency. What is news to-day isn't news to-morrow. But to-day 100,000 people, more or less, will want to know about it.

Illustration: Two events happen on the same day. One of them will be noted carefully in histories written fifty years hence, but it affects, and inter-

ests, at the hour of its occurrence very few persons. Of course it is news, but there may easily, at that hour, be much bigger. For another event occurring on that same day, though of a character which will make it forgotten fifty years later, at once and directly affects the lives of the hundred thousand.

Parallel: Two books are published on the same day. One of them will be dissected fifty years later by the H. W. Boyntons and Wilson Folletts of that time. But the number of persons who will read it within the twelvemonth of its birth is small —in the hundreds. The other book will be out of print and unremembered in five years. But within six months of its publication hundreds of thousands will read it. Among those hundreds of thousands there will be hundreds, and maybe thousands, whose thoughts, ideas, opinions will be seriously modified and in some cases lastingly modified —whose very lives may change trend as a result of reading that book.

No need to ask which event and which book is the bigger news. News is not the judgment of posterity on a book or event. News is not even the sum total of the effects of an event or a book on human society. News is the immediate importance, or interest, of an event or a book to the greatest number of people.

Eleanor H. Porter writes a new story. One in every thousand persons in the United States, or

perhaps more, wants to know about it, and at once. Isidor MacDougal (as Frank M. O'Brien would say) writes a literary masterpiece. Not one person in 500,000 cares, or would care even if the subject matter were made comprehensible to him. The oldtime "reviewer" would write three solid columns about Isidor MacDougal's work. The present-day literary editor puts it in competent hands for a simplified description to be printed later; and meanwhile he slaps Mrs. Porter's novel on his front page.

The troubles of a literary editor are the troubles of his friend up the aisle, the city editor. The worst of them is the occasional and inevitable error in giving out the assignment. All his reporters are good book reporters, but like the people on the city editor's staff they have usually their limitations, whether temperamental or knowledgable. Every once in a while the city editor sends to cover a fire a reporter who does speechified dinners beautifully but who has no sympathy with fires, who can't get through the fire lines, who writes that the fire "broke out" and burns up more words misdescribing the facts than the copyreader can extinguish with blue air and blue pencil. Just so it will happen in the best regulated literary editor's sanctum that, now and then, the editor will give the wrong book to the right man. Then he learns how un-

reasonable an author can be, if he doesn't know already from the confidences of publishers.

The literary editor's point of view, we believe, must be that so well expressed by Robert Cortes Holliday in the essay on *That Reviewer "Cuss"* in the book *Walking-Stick Papers*. Few books that get published by established publishing houses are so poor or so circumscribed as not to appeal to a body of readers somewhere, however small or scattered. The function of the book reporter is transcendently to find a book's waiting audience. If he can incidentally warn off those who don't belong to that audience, so much the better. That's a harder thing to do, of course.

2

The first requisite in a good book section is that it shall be interesting. As regards the news of new books, this is not difficult where book reporters, with the reporter's attitude, are on the job. Reporter's stories are sometimes badly written, but they are seldom dull. New books described by persons who have it firmly lodged in their noodles that they are "reviewing" the books, fare badly. The reviewer-obsession manifests itself in different ways. Sometimes the new book is made to march past the reviewer in column of squads, deploying at page 247 into skirmish formation and coming

at page 431 into company front. Very fine, but the reader wants to see them in the trenches, or, headed by the author uttering inspiriting yells, going over the top. On other occasions the reviewer assumes the so-called judicial attitude, the true inwardness of which William Schwenk Gilbert was perhaps the first to appreciate, with the possible exception of Lewis Carroll. Then doth our reviewer tell us what will be famous a century hence. Much we care what will be famous a century hence. What bothers us is what we shall read to-morrow. Of course it may happen to be one and the same book. Very well then, why not say so?

The main interest of the book section is served by getting crackajack book reporters. They will suffice for the people who read the section because they are interested in books. If the literary editor stops there, however, he might as well never have started. These people would read the book section anyway, unless it were filled throughout with absolutely unreadable matter, as has been known to happen. Even then they would doubtless scan the advertisements. At least, that is the theory on which publishers hopefully proceed. There are book sections where the contributors always specify that their articles shall have a position next to advertising matter.

No, the literary editor must interest people who do not especially care about books as such. He

can do it only by convincing them that books are just as full of life and just as much a part of a normal scheme of life as movies, or magazine cut-outs, or buying things on the instalment plan. Many a plain person has been led to read books by the fact that books are sometimes sold for instalment payments. Anything so sold, the ordinary person at once realizes, must be something which will fit into his scheme of existence. Acting on an instinct so old that its origin is shrouded in the mists of antiquity, the ordinary person pays the instalments. As a result, books are delivered at his residence. At first he is frightened. But he who looks and runs away may live to read another day. And from living to read it is but a step to reading to live.

Now one way to interest people who don't care about books for books' sake is to get up attractive pages, with pleasant or enticing headlines, with pictures, with jokes in the corners of 'em, with some new and original and not-hitherto-published matter in them, with poetry (all kinds), with large type, with signed articles so that the reader can know who wrote it and like or hate him with the necessary personal tag. But these things aren't literary, at all. They are just plain human and fall in the field of action of every editor alive—though of course editors who are dead are exempt from dealing with them. That is why a literary editor has

no need to be literary and, indeed, had better not be if it is going to prevent his being human.

We have been talking about the literary editor of a book section. There are not many book sections in this country. There are hundreds of book pages—half-pages and whole pages and double pages. The word "technique" is a loathsome thing and really without any significance in this connection, inasmuch as there is no particular way of doing the news of books well, and certainly no one way of doing it that is invariably better than any other. But for convenience we may permit ourselves to use the word "technique" for a moment; and, permission granted, we will merely say that the technique of a book page or pages is entirely different from the technique of a book section—if you know what we mean.

Clarified (we hope) it comes down to this, that things which a fellow would attempt in a book section he would not essay in a book page or double page. Conversely, things that will make a page successful may be out of place in a section. It is by no means wholly a matter of newspaper make-up, though there is that to it, too. But a man with a book section, though not necessarily more ambitious, is otherwisely so. For one thing, he expects to turn his reporters loose on more books than his colleague who has only a page or so to turn around in. For another, he will probably want to print a

careful list of all books he receives, of whatever sort, with a description of each as adequate as he can contrive in from twenty to fifty words, plus title, author, place of publication, publisher and price. Such lists are scanned by publishers, booksellers, librarians, readers in search of books on special subjects—by pretty nearly everybody who reads the section at all. Even the rather prosaic quality of such a list has its value. A woman down in Texas writes to the literary editor that there is too much conscious cleverness in lots of the stuff he prints, "but the lists of books are delightful"! There you are. In editing a book section you must be all things to all women.

The fellow with a page or two has quite other preoccupations. Where's a photo, or a cartoon? Must have a headline to break the solidity of this close-packed column of print. How about a funny column? That gifted person, Heywood Broun, taking charge of the book pages of the New York *Tribune,* announces that he is in favor of anything that will make book reviewing exciting. Nothing can make book reviewing exciting except book reporting and the books themselves; but if Broun is looking for excitement he will find it while filling the rôle of a literary editor. Before long he will learn that everybody in the world who is not the author of a book wants to review books—and some who are authors are willing to double in both parts.

Also, a considerable number of books are published annually in these still United States and a considerable percentage of those published find their way to the literary editor. It is no joke to receive, list with descriptions and sort out for assignment or non-assignment an average of 1,500 volumes a year, nor to assign to your book reporters, with as much infallibility in choosing the reporter as possible, perhaps half of the 1,500. Likewise there are assignments which several reporters want, a single book bespoken by four persons, maybe; and there are book assignments that are received with horror or sometimes with unflinching bravery by the good soldier. To hand a man, for instance, the extremely thick two-volume *History of Labour in the United States* by Professor Commons and his associates is like pinning a decoration on him for limitless valor under fire—only the decoration bears a strong resemblance to the Iron Cross.

3

Advertising?

Newspapers depend upon advertising for their existence, let alone their profits, in most instances. Of course, if there were no such things as advertisements we should still have newspapers. The news must be had. Presumably people would simply

pay more for it, or pay as much in a more direct way.

What is true of newspapers is true of parts of newspapers. The fact that a new book is news, and, as such, a thing that must more or less widely but indispensably be reported, is attested by the maintenance of book columns and pages in many newspapers where book advertising there is none. The people who read the Boston *Evening Transcript,* for example, would hardly endure the abolition of its book pages whether publishers used them to advertise in or not.

At the same time the publisher finds, and can find, no better medium than a good live book page or book section; nor can he find any other medium, nor can any other medium be created, in which his advertising will reach his full audience. "The trade" reads the excellent *Publishers' Weekly,* librarians have the journal of the American Library Association, readers have the newspapers and magazines of general circulation on which they rely for the news of new books. But the good book page or book section reaches all these groups. Publishers, authors, booksellers, librarians, book buyers—all read it. And if it is really good it spreads the book reading habit. Even a bookshop seldom does that—we have one exception in mind, pretty well known. People do not, ordinarily, read in a bookshop.

Of course a literary editor who has any regard for the vitality of his page or section is interested in book advertising. There's something wrong with him if he isn't. If he isn't he doesn't measure up to his job, which is to get people to read books and find their way about among them. A book page or a book section without advertising is no more satisfactory than a man or a woman without a sense of the value of money. It looks lopsided and it is lopsided. Readers resent it, and rightly. It's a beautiful façade, but the side view is disappointing.

The interest the literary editor takes in book advertising need no more be limited than the interest he takes in the growth or improvement of any other feature of his page or section. It has and can have no relation to his editorial or news policy. The moment such a thing is true his usefulness is ended. An alliance between the pen and the pocketbook is known the moment it is made and is transparent the moment it takes effect in print. A literary editor may resent, and keenly, as an editor, the fact that Bing, Bang & Company do not advertise their books in his domain. He is quite right to feel strongly about it. It has nothing to do with his handling of the Bing Bang books. That is determined by their news value alone. He may give the Bing Bang best seller a front page review and at the same time decline to meet Mr.

Bing or lunch with Mr. Bang. And he will be entirely honest and justified in his course, both ways. Puff & Boom advertise like thunder. The literary editor likes them both immensely, or, at least, he appreciates their good judgment (necessarily it seems good to him in his rôle as editor of the pages they use). But Puff & Boom's books are one-stick stories. Well, it's up to Puff & Boom, isn't it?

Oh, well, first and last there's a lot to being a literary editor, new style. But first and last there's a lot to being a human. Any one who can be human successfully can do the far lesser thing much better than any literary editor has yet done it.

WHAT EVERY PUBLISHER KNOWS

VI

WHAT EVERY PUBLISHER KNOWS

A BIG subject? Not necessarily. Discussed by an authority? No, indeed. On the contrary, about to be written upon by an amateur recording impressions extending a little over a year but formed in several relationships—as a "literary editor," as an author and, involuntarily, as an author's agent—but all friendly. Also, perhaps, as a pretty regular reader of publishers' products. What will first appear as vastness in the subject will shrink on a moment's examination. For our title is concerned only with what *every* publisher knows. A common piece of knowledge; or if not, after all, very "common," at least commonly held—by book publishers.

To state the main conclusion first: The one thing that every publisher knows, so far as a humble experience can deduce, is that what is called "general" publishing—meaning fiction and other books of general appeal—is a highly speculative enterprise and hardly a business at all. The clearest analogy seems to be with the theatrical business. Producing books and producing plays is terrifyingly alike. Full of risks. Requiring, unless genius is

manifested, considerable money capital. Likely to make, and far more likely to lose, small fortunes overnight. . . . Fatally fascinating. More an art than an organization but usually requiring an organization for the exhibition of the most brilliant art —like opera. A habit comparable with hasheesh. Heart-lifting—and headachy. 'Twas the night before publication and all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a stenographer. The day dawned bright and clear and a re-order for fifty more copies came in the afternoon mail. . . . Absentmindedly, the publisher-bridegroom pulled a contract instead of the wedding ring from his pocket. "With this royalty I thee wed," he murmured. And so she was published and they lived happily ever after until she left him because he did not clothe the children suitably, using green cloth with purple stamping.

2

A fine old publishing house once went back over the record of about 1,200 published books. This was a rather conservative firm, as little of a gambler as possible; its books had placed it, in every respect, in the first rank of publishing houses.

Of the 1,200 books just one in ten had made any sizable amount of money. The remaining 1,080 had either lost money, broken even, or made sums smaller than the interest on the money tied up in

them. Most of the 120 profitable books had been highly profitable; it will not surprise you to learn this when you reflect that these lucrative books had each to foot the bill, more or less, for nine others. So much for the analysis of figures. But what lay behind the figures? In some cases it was possible to tell why a particular book had sold. More often it wasn't. . . . Is this a business?

3

Thorwald Alembert Jenkinson has a book published. It's not a bad book, either; very good novel, as a matter of fact. Sales rather poor. Mr. Jenkinson's publisher takes his next book with a natural reluctance, buoyed up by the certitude that this is a better story and has in it elements that promise popularity. The publisher's salesman goes on the road. In Dodge City, Iowa, let us say, he enters a bookseller's and begins to talk the new Jenkinson novel. At the sound of his voice and the sight of the dummy the bookseller lifts repelling hands and backs away in horror.

"Stock that?" asks the bookseller rhetorically. "Not on your life! Why," with a gesture toward one shelf, "there's his first book. Twenty copies and only two sold!"

The new Jenkinson novel has a wretched advance sale. Readers, not seeing it in the bookshops, may

yet call for it when they read a review—not necessarily a favorable account—or when they see it advertised. If Mr. Jenkinson wrote histories or biographies the bookseller's wholly human attitude would not much matter. But a novel is different. The customer wanting Jenkinson's *History of France* would order it or go elsewhere, most likely. The customer wanting Jenkinson's new novel is quite often content with Tarkington's instead.

When you go to the ticket agency to get seats at a Broadway show and find they have none left for *Whoop 'Er Up* you grumble, and then buy seats at *Let's All Go.* Not that you really care. Not that any one really cares. The man who produced *Whoop 'Er Up* is also the producer of *Let's All Go,* both theatres are owned by a single group, the librettists are one and the same and the music of both is equally bad, proceeding from an identical source. Even the stagehands work interchangeably on a strict union scale. But Mr. Jenkinson did not write Tarkington's novel, the two books are published by firms that have not a dollar in common, and only the bookseller can preserve an evatanguayan indifference over your choice.

4

The publisher's salesman comes to the bookseller's lair equipped with dummies. These show the

book's exterior, its size, thickness, paper, binding and (very important) its jacket. Within the dummy are blank pages, or perhaps the first twenty pages of the book printed over and over to give the volume requisite thickness. The bookseller may read these twenty pages. If the author has got plenty of action into them the bookseller is favorably impressed. Mainly he depends for his idea of the book upon what the salesman and the publisher's catalogue tells him. He has to. He can't read 'em all.

Sometimes the salesman can illustrate his remarks. Henry Leverage wrote an ingenious story called *Whispering Wires* in which the explanation of a mysterious murder depended upon the telephone, converted by a too-gifted electrician into a single-shot pistol. Offering the story to the booksellers, Harry Apeler carried parts of a telephone receiver about the country with him, unscrewing and screwing on again the delicate disc that you put against your ear and showing how the deed was done.

5

The bookseller, like every one else, goes by experience. It is, or has been, his experience that collections of short stories do not sell well. And this is true despite O. Henry, Fannie Hurst and Edna Ferber. It is so true that publishers shy at short story volumes. Where there is a name that

will command attention—Alice Brown, Theodore Dreiser—or where a special appeal is possible, as in Edward J. O'Brien's *The Best Short Stories of 191-*, books made up of short tales may sell. But there are depressing precedents.

In his interesting article on *The Publishing Business,* appearing in 1916 in the *Publishers' Weekly* and since reprinted as a booklet, Temple Scott cites Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* as a modern instance of a special sort of book finding its own very special, but surprisingly large, public. "Nine booksellers out of ten 'passed' it when the traveller brought it round," observes Mr. Scott. "Fortunately, for the publisher, the press acted the part of the expert, and public attention was secured." Was the bookseller to blame? Most decidedly not. *Creative Evolution* is nothing to tie up your money in on a dim chance that somewhere an enthusiastic audience waits for the Bergsonian gospel.

Mr. Scott's article, which is inconclusive, in our opinion, points out clearly that as no two books are like each other no two books are really the same article. Much fiction, to be sure, is of a single stamp; many books, and here we are by no means limited to fiction, have whatever unity comes from the authorship of a single hand. This unity may exist, elusively, as in the stories of Joseph Conrad, or may be confined almost wholly to the presence of the same name on two titlepages, as in the fact that

The Virginian and *The Pentecost of Calamity* are both the work of Owen Wister.

No! Two books are most often and emphatically *not* the same article. Mr. Scott is wholly right when he points out every book should have advertising, or other attention, peculiar to itself. A method of reporting one book will not do for another, any more than a publisher's circular describing one book will do to describe a second. The art of reporting books or other news, like the art of advertising books or other commodities, is one of endless differentiation. In the absence of real originality, freshness and ideas, both objects go unachieved or else are achieved by speciousness, not to say guile. You, for example, do not really believe that by reading Hannibal Halcombe's *How to Heap Up Happiness* you will be able to acquire the equivalent of a college education in 52 weeks. But somewhere in *How to Heap Up Happiness* Mr. Halcombe tells how he made money or how he learned to enjoy pictures on magazine covers or a happy solution of his unoriginal domestic troubles—any one of which you may crave to know and honest information of which will probably send you after the book.

6

At this point in the discussion of our subject we have had the incredible folly to look back at our

outline. Yes, there is an outline—or a thing of shreds and patches which once went by that description. What, you will say, wrecked so soon, after a mere introduction of 1,500 words or so? Certainly. Outlines are to writers what architects' plans are to builders, or what red rags are supposed to be to bulls. Or, as the proverbial (our favorite adjective) chaff before the wind. Our outline says that the subject of selling books should be subdivision (c) under division 1 of the three partitions of our subject. All Gaul and Poland are not the only objects divided in three parts. Every serious subject is, likewise.

Never mind. We shall have to struggle along as best we can. We have been talking about selling books, or what every publisher knows in regard to it. Well, then, every publisher knows that selling books as it has mainly to be conducted under present conditions, is just as much a matter of merchandising as selling bonnets, bathrobes and birdseed. But this is one of the things that people outside the publishing and bookselling businesses seldom grasp. A cultural air, for them, invests the book business. The curse of the genteel hangs about it. It is almost professional, like medicine and baseball. It has an odor, like sanctity. . . . All wrong.

Bonnets, bathrobes, birdseed, books. All are saleable if you go about it right. And how is that? you ask.

The best way to sell bonnets is to lay a great foundational demand for headgear. The best way to sell bathrobes is to encourage bathing. The best way to sell birdseed is to put a canary in every home. It might be supposed that the best way to sell books would be to get people to read. Yes, it might be far more valuable in the end to stimulate and spread the reading habit than to try to sell 100,000 copies of any particular book.

Of course every publisher knows this and of course all the publishers, associating themselves for the promotion of a common cause not inconceivably allied to the general welfare, spend time and money in the effort to make readers—not of Mrs. Halcyon Hunter's *Love Has Wings* or Mr. Caspar Cartouche's *Martin the Magnificent,* but of books, just good books of any sort soever. Yes, of course. . . .

This would be—beg pardon, is—the thing that actually and immediately as well as ultimately counts: Let us get people to read, to like to read, to *enjoy* reading, and they will, sooner or later, read books. Sooner or later they'll become book readers and book buyers. Sooner or later books will sell as well as automobiles. . . .

On the merely technical side of bookselling, on the immediate problem of selling particular new novels, collections of short stories, histories, books of verse, and all the rest, the publishers have, collectively at least, not much to learn from their fel-

low merchants with the bonnets, bathrobes and birdseed. The mechanism of merchandising is so highly developed in America that many of the methods resemble the interchangeable parts of standardized manufactures everywhere. Suppose we have a look at these methods.

7

The lesson of flexibility has been fully mastered by at least two American publishing houses. With their very large lists of new books they contrive to avoid, as much as possible, fixed publication dates. While their rivals are pinning themselves fast six months ahead, these publishers are moving largely but conditionally six and nine months ahead, and less largely but with swift certainty three months, two months, even one month from the passing moment. And they are absolutely right and profit by their rightness. For this reason: Everything that is printed has in it an element of that timeliness, that ephemerality if you like but also that widening ripple of human interest which is the unique essence of what we call "news." This quality is present, in a perceptible amount, even in the most serious sort of printed matter. Let us take, as an example, Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Oh! exclaims the reader, there surely is a book with no ephemerality about it! No? But there was an immense quantity of

just that in its publication. It came at the right hour. Fifty years earlier it would have gone unnoticed. To-day it is transcended by a body of biological knowledge that Darwin knew not.

Fifty years, one way or the other, would have made a vast difference in the reception, the import, the influence of even so epochal a book as *The Origin of Species*. Now a little reflection will show that, in the case of lesser books, the matter of time is far more sharply important. Darwin's book was so massive that ten or twenty years either way might not have mattered. But in such a case as John Spargo's *Bolshevism* a few months may matter. In the case of *Mr. Britling* the month as well as the year mattered vitally. Time is everything, in the fate of many a book, even as in the fate of a magazine article, a poem, an essay, a short story. Arthur Guy Empey was on the very hour with *Over the Top;* but the appearance of his *Tales from a Dugout* a few days after the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918, was one of the minor tragedies of the war.

Therefore the publisher who can, as nearly as human and mechanical conditions permit, preserve flexibility in his publishing plans, has a very great advantage over inelastic competitors. That ironclad arrangements a half year ahead can be avoided the methods of two of the most important American houses demonstrate. Either can get out a book

on a month's notice. More than once in a season this spells the difference between a sale of 5,000 and one of 15,000 copies—that is, between not much more than "breaking even" and making a handsome profit.

8

Every book that is published requires advertising though perhaps no two books call for advertising in just the same way. One of the best American publishing houses figures certain sums for advertising—whatever form it may take—in its costs of manufacture and then the individual volumes have to take each their chances of getting, each, its proper share of the money. Other houses have similar unsatisfactory devices for providing an advertising fund. The result is too often not unlike the revolving fund with which American railways were furnished by Congress—it revolved so fast that there wasn't enough to go round long.

A very big publishing house does differently. To the cost of manufacture of each book is added a specific, flat and appropriate sum of money to advertise that particular book. The price of the book is fixed accordingly. When the book is published there is a definite sum ready to advertise it. No book goes unadvertised. If the book "catches on" there is no trouble, naturally, about more advertising money; if it does not sell the advertising of it

stops when the money set aside has been exhausted and the publishers take their loss with a clear conscience; they have done their duty by the book. It may be added that this policy has always paid. Combined with other distinctive methods it has put the house which adopted it in the front rank.

9

Whether to publish a small, carefully selected list of books in a season or a large and comprehensive list is not wholly decided by the capital at the publisher's command. Despite the doubling of all costs of book manufacture, publishing is not yet an enterprise which requires a great amount of capital, as compared with other industries of corresponding volume. The older a publishing house the more likely it is to restrict its list of new books. It has more to lose and less to gain by taking a great number of risks in new publications. At the same time it is subjected to severe competition because the capital required to become a book publisher is not large. Hence much caution, too much, no doubt, in many cases and every season. Still, promising manuscripts are lamentably few. "Look at the stuff that gets published," is the classic demonstration of the case.

The older the house, the stronger its already accumulated list, the more conservative, naturally, it

becomes, the less inclined to play with loaded dice in the shape of manuscripts. Yet a policy of extreme caution and conservatism is more dangerous and deadly than a dash of the gambler's makeup. Two poor seasons together are noticed by the trade; four poor seasons together may put a house badly behind. A season with ten books only, all good, all selling moderately well, is perhaps more meritorious and more valuable in the long run than a season with thirty books, nearly all poor except for one or two sensational successes. But the fellow who brings out the thirty books and has one or two decided best sellers is the fellow who will make large profits, attract attention and acquire prestige. It is far better to try everything you can that seems to have "a chance" than to miss something awfully good. And, provided you drop the bad potatoes quickly, it will pay you better in the end.

There *must* be a big success somewhere on your list. A row of respectable and undistinguished books is the most serious of defeats.

10

Suppose you were a book publisher and had put out a novel or two by Author A. with excellent results on the profit side of the ledger. Author A. is plainly a valuable property, like a copper mine in war time. A.'s third manuscript comes along in due

time. It is entirely different from the first two so-successful novels; it is pretty certain to disappoint A.'s "audience." You canvass the subject with A., who can't "see" your arguments and suggestions. It comes to this: Either you publish the third novel or you lose A. Which, darling reader, would you, if you were the publisher, do? Would you choose the lady and *The Tiger?*

You are neatly started as a book publisher. You can't get advance sales for your productions (to borrow a term from the theatre). You go to Memphis and Syracuse and interview booksellers. They say to you: "For heaven's sake, get authors whose names mean something! Why should we stock fiction by Horatius Hotaling when we can dispose of 125 copies of E. Phillips Oppenheim's latest in ten days from publication?" Returning thoughtfully to New York, you happen to meet a Celebrated Author. Toward the close of luncheon at the Brevoort he offers to let you have a book of short stories. One of them (it will be the title-story, of course) was published in the *Saturday Evening Post,* bringing to Mr. Lorimer, the editor, 2,500 letters and 117 telegrams of evenly divided praise and condemnation. Short stories are a stiff proposition; but the Celebrated Author has a name that will insure a certain advance sale and a fame that will insure reviewers' attention. For you to become his publisher will be as prestigious as it is adventitious.

From ethical and other motives, you seek out the C. A.'s present publisher—old, well-established house—and inquire if Octavo & Duodecimo will have any objection to your publishing the C. A.'s book of tales. Mr. Octavo replies in friendly accents:

"Not a bit! Not a bit! Go to it! However, we've lent . . . (the C. A.) $2,500 at one time or another in advance moneys on a projected novel. Travel as far as you like with him, but remember that he can't give you a novel until he has given us one or has repaid that $2,500."

What to do? 'Tis indeed a pretty problem. If you pay Octavo & Duodecimo $2,500 you can have the C. A.'s next novel—worth several times as much as any book of tales, at the least. On the other hand, there is no certainty that the C. A. will deliver you the manuscript of a novel. He has been going to deliver it to Octavo & Duodecimo for three years. And you can't afford to tie up $2,500 on the chance that he'll do for you what he hasn't done for them. Because $2,500 is, to you, a lot of money.

In the particular instance where this happened (except for details, we narrate an actual occurrence) the beginning publisher went ahead and published the book of tales, and afterward another book of tales, and let Octavo & Duodecimo keep their option on the C. A.'s next novel, if he ever writes any. The probabilities are that the C. A. will write short stories for the rest of his life rather than de-

liver a novel from which he will receive not one cent until $2,500 has been deducted from the royalties.

II

English authors are keenest on advance money. The English writer who will undertake to do a book without some cash in hand before putting pen to paper is a great rarity. An American publisher who wants English manuscripts and goes to London without his checkbook won't get anywhere. A little real money will go far. It will be almost unnecessary for the publisher who has it to entrain for those country houses where English novelists drink tea and train roses. Kent, Sussex, Norfolk, Yorkshire, Wessex, &c., will go down to London. Mr. Britling will motor into town to talk about a contract. All the London clubs will be named as rendezvous. Visiting cards will reach the publisher's hotel, signifying the advent of Mr. Percival Fotheringay of Houndsditch, Bayswater, Wapping Old Stairs, London, B. C. Ah, yes, Fotheringay; wonderful stories of Whitechapel and the East End, really! Knows the people—what?

It has to be said that advances on books seem to retard their delivery. We have in mind a famous English author (though he might as well be American, so far as this particular point is concerned) who got an advance of $500 (wasn't it?) some years

ago from Quarto & Folio—on a book of essays. Quarto & Folio have carried that title in their spring and fall catalogues of forthcoming books ever since. Spring and fall they despair afresh. Daylight saving did nothing to help them—an hour gained was a mere bagatelle in the cycles of time through which *Fads and Fatalities* keeps moving in a regular and always equidistant orbit. If some day the League of Nations shall ordain that the calendar be set ahead six months Quarto & Folio may get the completed manuscript of *Fads and Fatalities.*

American authors are much less insistent on advance payments than their cousins 3,000 miles removed. A foremost American publishing house has two inflexible rules: No advance payments and no verdict on uncompleted manuscripts. Inflexible—but it is to be suspected that though this house never bends the rule there are times when it has to break it. What won't bend must break. There are a few authors for whom any publisher will do anything except go to jail. Probably you would make the same extensive efforts to retain your exclusive rights in a South African diamond digging which had already produced a bunch of Kohinoors.

12

There is a gentleman's agreement among publishers, arrived at some years back, not to indulge

in cutthroat competition for each other's authors. This ethical principle, like most ethical principles now existing, is dictated quite as much by considerations of keeping a whole skin as by a sense of professional honor. There are some men in the book publishing business whose honorable standards have a respect for the other fellow's property first among their Fourteen Points. There are others who are best controlled by a knowledge that to do so-and-so would be very unhealthy for themselves.

The agreement, like most unwritten laws, is interpreted with various shadings. Some of these are subtle and some of them are not. It is variously applied by different men in different cases, sometimes unquestionably and sometimes doubtfully. But in the main it is pretty extensively and strictly upheld, in spirit as in letter.

How far it transgresses authors' privileges or limits authors' opportunities would be difficult to say. In the nature of the case, any such understanding must operate to some extent to lessen the chances of an author receiving the highest possible compensation for his work. Whether this is offset by the favors and concessions, pecuniary and otherwise, made to an author by a publisher to whom he adheres, can't be settled. The relation of author and publisher, at best, calls for, and generally elicits, striking displays of loyalty on both sides. Particu-

larly among Americans, the most idealistic people on earth.

In its practical working this publishers' understanding operates to prevent any publisher "approaching" an author who has an accepted publisher of his books. Unless you, as a publisher, are yourself approached by Author B., whose several books have been brought out by Publisher C., you are theoretically bound hand and foot. And even if Author B. comes to you there are circumstances under which you may well find it desirable to talk B.'s proposal over with C., hitherto his publisher. After that talk you may wish B. were in Halifax. If everybody told the truth matters would be greatly simplified. Or would they?

If you hear that Author D., who writes very good sellers, is dissatisfied with Publisher F., what is your duty in the circumstances? Author D. may not come to you, for there are many publishers for such as he to choose from. Shall we say it is your duty to acquaint D., indirectly perhaps, with the manifest advantages of bringing you his next novel? We'll say so.

Whatever publishers agree to, authors are free. And every publisher knows how easy it is to lose an author. Why, they leave you like that! (Business of snapping fingers.) And for the lightest reasons! (Register pain or maybe mournfulness.) If D. W. Griffith wanted to make a Movie of a Pub-

lisher Losing an Author he would find the action too swift for the camera to record. Might as well try to film *The Birth of a Notion.*

13

One of the most fascinating mysteries about publishers, at least to authors, is the method or methods by which they determine the availability of manuscripts. Fine word, availability. Noncommittal and all that. It has no taint of infallibility —which is the last attribute a publisher makes pretensions to.

There are places where one man decides whether a manuscript will do and there are places where it takes practically the whole clerical force and several plebiscites to accept or reject the author's offering. One house which stands in the front rank in this country accepts and rejects mainly on the verdicts of outsiders—specialists, however, in various fields. Another foremost publishing house has a special test for "popular" novels in manuscript. An extra ration of chewing gum is served out to all the stenographers and they are turned loose on the typewritten pages. If they react well the firm signs a contract and prints a first edition of from 5,000 to 25,000 copies, depending on whether it is a first novel or not and the precise comments of the girls at page 378.

Always the sales manager reads the manuscript, if it is at all seriously considered. What he says has much weight. He's the boy who will have to sell the book to the trade and unless he can see things in it, or can be got to, there is practically no hope despite Dr. Munyon's index finger.

Recently a publishing house of national reputation has done a useful thing—we are not prepared to say it is wholly new—by establishing a liaison officer. This person does not pass on manuscripts, unless incidentally by way of offering his verdict to be considered with the verdicts of other department heads. But once a manuscript has been accepted by the house it goes straight to this man who reads it intensively and sets down, on separate sheets, everything about it that might be useful to (a) the advertising manager, (b) the sales manager and his force, and (c) the editorial people handling the firm's book publicity effort.

14

A little knowledge of book publishing teaches immense humility. The number of known instances in which experienced publishers have erred in judgment is large. Authors always like to hear of these. But too much must not be deduced from them. Every one has heard of the rejection of Henry Sydnor Harrison's novel *Queed*. Many have heard of

the publisher who decided not to "do" Vicente Blasco Ibañez's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. There was more than one of him, by the way, and in each case he had an exceedingly bad translation to take or reject (we are told), the only worthy translation, apparently, being that which was brought out with such sensational success in the early fall of 1918. A publisher lost *Spoon River Anthology* because of a delay in acceptance—he wanted the opinion of a confrere not easily reached. For every publisher's mistake of this sort there could probably be cited an instance of perspicacity much more striking. Such was the acceptance of Edward Lucas White's *El Supremo* after many rejections. And how about the publisher who accepted *Queed?*

15

Let us conclude these haphazard and very likely unhelpful musings on an endless subject by telling a true story.

In the spring of 1919 one of the principal publishing houses in America and England undertook the publication of a very unusual sort of a novel, semi-autobiographical, a work of love and leisure by a man who had gained distinction as an executive. It was a fine piece of work, though strange; had a delightful reminiscential quality. The book was made up, a first edition of moderate size printed and

bound. It was not till this had been done and the book was ready to place on sale that the head of this publishing house had an opportunity to read it.

The Head is a veteran publisher famous for his prescience in the matter of manuscripts and for honorable dealings.

He read the book through and was charmed by it; he looked at the book and was unhappy. He sent for everybody who had had to do with the making of this book. He held up his copy and fluttered pages and said, in effect:

"This has been done all wrong. Here is a book of quite exceptional quality. I don't think it will sell. Only moderately, though perhaps rather steadily for some years to come. It won't make us money. To speak of. But it deserves, intrinsically, better treatment. Better binding. This is only ordinary six-months'-selling novel binding. It deserves larger type. Type with a more beautiful face. Fewer lines to the page. Lovelier dress from cover to cover.

"Throw away the edition that has been printed. Destroy it or something. At least, hide it. Don't let any of it get out. For this has been done wrong, all wrong. Do it over."

So they went away from his presence and did it right. It meant throwing away about $2,000. Or was it a $2,000 investment in the good opinion of people who buy, read and love books?

THE SECRET OF THE BEST SELLER

VII

THE SECRET OF THE BEST SELLER

BY "best seller" we may mean one of several things. Dr. Emmett Holt's *Care and Feeding of Children,* of which the fifty-eighth edition was printed in the spring of 1919, is one kind of best seller; Owen Wister's *The Virginian* is quite another. The number of editions of a book is a very uncertain indication of sales to a person not familiar with book publishing. Editions may consist of as few as 500 copies or as many as 25,000 or even 50,000. The advance sale of Gene Stratton-Porter's *A Daughter of the Land* was, if we recall the figure exactly, 150,000 copies. These, therefore, were printed and distributed by the day when the book was placed on sale, or shortly thereafter. To call this the "first edition" would be rather meaningless.

One thousand copies of a book of poems—unless it be an anthology—is a large edition indeed. But not for Edgar Guest, whose books sell in the tens of thousands. The sale, within a couple of years, of 31,000 copies of the poems of Alan Seeger was phenomenal.

The first book of essays of an American writer sold 6,000 copies within six months of its publication. This upset most precedents of the book-selling trade. The author's royalties may have been $1,125. A few hundred dollars should be added to represent money received for the casual publication of the essays in magazines before their appearance in the book. Of course the volume did not stop selling at the end of six months.

Compare these figures, however, with the income of one of the most popular American novelists. A single check for $75,000. Total payments, over a period of fifteen years, of $750,000 to $1,000,000. Yet it is doubtful if the books of this novelist reached more than 65 per cent. of their possible audience.

It is a moderate estimate, in our opinion, that most books intended for the "general reader," whether fiction or not, do not reach more than one-quarter of the whole body of readers each might attain. With the proper machinery of publicity and merchandising book sales in the United States could be quadrupled. We share this opinion with Harry Blackman Sell of the Chicago *Daily News* and were interested to find it independently confirmed by James H. Collins who, writing in the *Saturday Evening Post* of May 3, 1919, under the heading *When Merchandise Sells Itself,* said:

"Book publishing is one industry that suffers for

lack of retail outlets. Even the popular novel sells in numbers far below the real buying power of this nation of readers, because perhaps 25 per cent. of the public can examine it and buy it at the city book stores, while it is never seen by the rest of the public.

"For lack of quantity production based on wide retail distribution the novel sells for a dollar and a half.

"But for a dollar you can buy a satisfactory watch.

"That is made possible by quantity production. Quantity production of dollar watches is based on their sale in 50,000 miscellaneous shops, through the standard stock and the teaching of modern mercantile methods. Book publishers have made experiments with the dollar novel, but it sold just about the same number of copies as the $1.50 novel, because only about so many fiction buyers were reached through the bookstores. Now the standard-stock idea is being applied to books, with assortments of 50 or 100 proved titles carried by the druggist and stationer."

2

Speaking rather offhandedly, we are of opinion that not more than two living American writers of fiction have achieved anything like a 100 per cent.

sale of their books. These are Harold Bell Wright and Gene Stratton-Porter.

I am indebted to Mr. Frank K. Reilly, president of the Reilly & Lee Company, Chicago, selling agents for the original editions of all Mr. Wright's books, for the following figures:

"We began," wrote Mr. Reilly, "with *That Printer of Udell's*—selling, as I remember the figures, about 20,000. Then *The Shepherd of the Hills*—about 100,000, I think. Then the others in fast growing quantities. For *The Winning of Barbara Worth* we took four orders in advance which totalled nearly 200,000 copies. On *When a Man's a Man* we took the biggest single order ever placed for a novel at full price—that is, a cloth-bound, 'regular' $1.35 book—250,000 copies from the Western News Company. The advance sale of this 1916 book was over 465,000."

Mr. Reilly wrote at the beginning of March, 1919, from French Lick, Indiana. At that time Mr. Wright's publishers had in hand a novel, *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent,* published August 21, 1919. They had arranged for a first printing of 750,000 copies and were as certain of selling 500,000 copies before August 1 as you are of going to sleep some time in the next twenty-four hours. It was necessary to make preparations for the sale of 1,000,000 copies of the new novel before August 21, 1920.

The sale of 1,000,000 copies of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* within a year of publication may be said to achieve a 100 per cent. circulation so far as existing book merchandising facilities allow.

The sale, within ten years, of 670,733 copies of Gene Stratton-Porter's story, *Freckles,* approaches a 100 per cent. sale but with far too much retardation.

3

How has the 100 per cent. sale for the Harold Bell Wright books been brought within hailing distance?

Before us lies a circular which must have been mailed to most booksellers in the United States early in the spring of 1919. It is headed: "First Publicity Advertisement of Our $100,000 Campaign." Below this legend is an advertisement of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent.* Below that is a statement that the advertisement will appear, simultaneously with the book's publication, in "magazines and national and religious weeklies having millions upon millions of circulation. In addition to this our newspaper advertising will cover all of the larger cities of the United States." Then follows a list of "magazines, national and religious weeklies covered by our signed advertising contracts."

There are 132 of them. The range is from the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *New Republic* to *Vanity*

Fair and *Town Topics* in one slant; from *System* and *Physical Culture* to *Zion's Herald* and the *Catholic News;* from *Life* to *Needlecraft;* from the *Photoplay World* to the *Girl's Companion;* from the *Outlook* to the *Lookout*—and to and fro and back and forth in a web covering all America between the two Portlands.

There are about 140,000,000 persons in the United States and Great Britain together. Over 100,000,000 of them, we are told, have read a Harold Bell Wright book or seen a Harold Bell Wright movie.

The secret of the sale of Mr. Wright's books, so far as the external factor is concerned, resides in the fact that his stories have been brought to the attention of thousands upon thousands who, from one year's end to the other, never have a new book of fiction thrust upon their attention by advertising or by sight of the book itself.

4

We speak of the "external factor." There is an external factor quite as much as an internal factor in the success of every best seller of whatever sort. The tendency of everybody who gives any attention to the subject, but particularly the book publisher, is to study the internal factor almost to the exclusion of the other. What, you naturally ask

yourself, are the qualities in this book that have made it sell so remarkably?

The internal factor is important. Its importance, doubtless, cannot be overrated. But it is not the whole affair. Before we go further let us lay down some general principles that are not often formulated clearly enough even in the minds of those to whom they import most.

1. The internal factor—certain qualities of the book itself—predetermines its possible audience.

2. The external factor—the extent to which it is brought to public attention, the manner in which it is presented to the public, the ubiquity of copies for sale—determines its actual audience.

3. The internal factor can make a best seller of a book with almost no help from the external factor, but cannot give it a 100 per cent. sale.

4. The external factor cannot make a big seller where the internal factor is not of the right sort; but it can always give a 100 per cent. sale.

5. The internal factor is only partly in the publisher's control; the external factor is entirely controllable by the publisher.

There are two secrets of the best seller. One resides in the book itself, the other rests in the manner of its exploitation. One is inherent, the other is circumstantial. One is partly controllable by the publisher, the other is wholly so. Since a book possessing certain qualities in a sufficient degree will

sell heavily anyway, it is human nature to hunt ceaselessly for this thing which will triumph over every sort of handicap and obstacle. But it is a lazy way to do. It is not good business. It cannot, ultimately, pay. The successful book publisher of the future is going to be the publisher who works for a 100 per cent. sale on all his books. When he gets a book with an internal factor which would make it a best seller anyway, it will simply mean that he will have to exert himself markedly less to get a 100 per cent. result. He will have such best sellers and will make large sums of money with them, but they will be incidents and not epochal events; for practically all his books will be good sellers.

5

Before we go on to a discussion of the internal factor of the best seller we want to stress once more, and constructively and suggestively, the postnatal attention it should receive. The first year and the second summer are fatal to far too many books as well as humans. And this is true despite the differences between the two. If 100,000 copies represent the 100 per cent. sale of a given volume you may declare that it makes no difference whether that sale is attained in six months or six years. From the business standpoint of a quick turnover six months is a dozen times better, you may argue;

and if interest on invested money be thought of as compounding, the apparent difference in favor of the six-months' sale is still more striking. This would perhaps be true if the author's next book could invariably be ready at the end of the six-months' period. Other ifs will occur to those with some knowledge of the publishing business and a moderate capacity for reflection.

Most books are wrongly advertised and inadequately advertised, and rather frequently advertised in the wrong places.

Of the current methods of advertising new fiction only one is unexceptionably good. This is the advertising which arrests the reader's attention and baits his interest by a few vivid sentences outlining the crisis of the story, the dilemma that confronts the hero or heroine, the problem of whether the hero or heroine acted rightly; or paints in a few swift strokes some exciting episode of the action—ending with a question that will stick in the reader's mind. Such an advertisement should always have a drawing or other illustration if possible. It should be displayed in a generous space and should be placed broadcast but with much discrimination as to where it is to appear.

A kind of advertisement somewhat allied to this, but not in use at all despite its assured selling power would consist of the simple reproduction of a photographed page of the book. The Detroit *News* has

used such reproduced pages so effectively as illustrations that it seems strange no publisher (so far as we know) has followed suit. Striking pages, and pages containing not merely objective thrill but the flavor which makes the fascination of a particular book, can be found in most novels. The Detroit *News* selected a page of the highest effectiveness from so subtle a romance as Joseph Conrad's *The Arrow of Gold.* This manner of advertising, telling from its complete restraint, is applicable to non-fiction. A page of a book of essays by Samuel Crothers would have to be poorly taken not to disclose, in its several hundred words, the charm and fun of his observations. Publishers of encyclopædias have long employed this "page-from-the-book" method of advertisement with the best results.

The ordinary advertisement of a book, making a few flat assertions of the book's extraordinary merit, has become pretty hopelessly conventionalized. The punch is gone from it, we rather fear forever. In all conscience, it is psychologically defective in that it tries to coerce attention and credence instead of trying to attract, fascinate or arouse the beholder. The advertiser is not different, essentially, from the public speaker. The public speaker who aims to compel attention by mere thundering or by extraordinary assertions has no chance against the speaker who amuses, interests,

or agreeably piques his audience, who stirs his auditors' curiosity or kindles their collective imagination.

There is too little personality in the advertising of books, and when we say personality we mean, in most cases, the author's personality. The bald and unconvincing recital of the opinion of the *Westminster Gazette,* that this is a book every Anglo-American should read, is as nothing compared with a few dozen words that could have been written of, or by, no man on earth except H. G. Wells.

The internal factor of H. G. Wells's novel *The Undying Fire* is so big that it constitutes a sort of a least common multiple of the hopes, doubts and fears of hundreds of thousands of humans. A 100 per cent. sale of the book, under existing merchandising conditions, would be 400,000 copies, at the very least. It ought to be advertised in every national and religious weekly of 10,000 circulation or over in the United States, and in every periodical of that circulation reaching a rural audience. And it ought to be advertised, essentially, in this manner:

SHALL MAN CURSE GOD AND DIE?
No! Job Answered
NO! H. G. WELLS TELLS STRICKEN EUROPE
Read His New Short Novel, "The Undying Fire," in Which He Holds Out the Hope that Men

May Yet Unite to Organize the World and Save Mankind from Extinction

Such an appeal to the hope, the aspiration, the unconquerable idealism of men everywhere, to the social instinct which has its roots in thousands of years of human history, cannot fail.

6

Books are wrongly advertised, as we have said, and they are inadequately advertised, by which we mean in too few places; and perhaps "insufficiently advertised" had been a more accurate phrase.

It is correct and essential to advertise books in periodicals appealing wholly or partly to book readers. It is just as essential to recruit readers.

Book readers can be recruited just as magazine readers are recruited. The most important way of getting magazine readers is still the subscription agent. Every community of any size in these United States should have in it a man or woman of at least high school education and alert enthusiasm selling books of all the publishers. Where there is a good bookstore such an agent is unnecessary or may be found in the owner of the store or an employee thereof. Most communities cannot support a store given over entirely to bookselling. In them let there be agents giving their whole time

or their spare time and operating with practically no overhead expense. Where the agents receive salaries these must be paid jointly by all the publishers whose books they handle. This should naturally be done through a central bureau or selling agency. Efficient agencies already exist.

The "book agent" is a classical joke. He is a classical joke because he peddled one book, and the wrong sort of a book, from door to door. You must equip him with fifty books, new and alluring, of all publishers; and arm him with sheets and circulars describing enticingly a hundred others. He must know individuals and their tastes and must have one or more of the best book reviewing periodicals in the country. He must have catalogues and news notes and special offers to put over. If he gives you all his time he must have assurance of a living, especially until he has a good start or exhibits his incapacity for pioneering. He must have an incentive above and beyond any salary that may be paid him.

But the consideration of details in this place is impossible. The structural outline and much adaptable detail is already in highly successful use by periodicals of many sorts. In fundamentals it requires no profounder skill than that of the clever copyist.

7

We charged in the third count of our indictment that books are rather frequently advertised in the wrong places. We had in mind the principle that for every book considerable enough to get itself published by a publisher of standing there is, somewhere, a particular audience; just as there is a certain body of readers for every news item of enough moment to get printed in a daily newspaper. A juster way of expressing the trouble would be this: Books are rather frequently not advertised in the right places.

The clues to the right places must be sought in the book itself and its authorship, always; and they are innumerable. As no two books are alike the best thing to do will be to take a specific example. Harry Lauder's *A Minstrel in France* will serve.

The first and most obvious thing to do is to advertise it in every vaudeville theatre in America. Wherever the programme includes motion pictures flash the advertisement on the screen with a fifteen second movie of Lauder himself. Posters and circulars in the lobby must serve if there are no screen pictures.

The next and almost equally obvious thing is to have Lauder make a phonograph record of some particularly effective passage in the book, marketing the record in the usual way, at a popular price.

Newspaper and magazine advertising must be used heavily and must be distributed on the basis of circulation almost entirely.

8

The external factor in the success of the best seller is so undeveloped and so rich in possibilities that one takes leave of it with regret; but we must go on to some consideration of the internal factor that makes for big sales—the quality or qualities in the book itself.

Without going into a long and elaborate investigation of best-seller books, sifting and reasoning until we reach rock bottom, we had better put down a few dogmas. These, then, are the essentials of best-selling fiction so far as our observation and intellect has carried us:

1. A good story; which means, as a rule, plenty of surface action but always means a crisis in the affairs of one or two most-likable characters, a crisis that is *satisfactorily* solved.

Mark the italicized word. Not a "happy ending" in the twisted sense in which that phrase is used. Always a happy ending in the sense in which we say, "That was a happy word"—meaning a fit word, the "mot just" of the French. Always a fitting ending, not always a "happy ending" in the sense of a pleasant ending. The ending of *Mr.*

Britling Sees It Through is not pleasant, but fitting and, to the majority of readers, uplifting, ennobling, fine.

2. Depths below the surface action for those who care to plumb them.

No piece of fiction can sell largely unless it has a region of philosophy, moral ideas—whatever you will to call it—for those who crave and must have that mental immersion. The reader must not be led beyond his depth but he must be able to go into deep water and swim as far as his strength will carry him if he so desires.

3. The ethical, social and moral implications of the surface action must, in the end, accord with the instinctive desires of mankind. This is nothing like as fearful as it sounds, thus abstractly stated. The instinctive desires of men are pretty well known. Any psychologist can tell you what they are. They are few, primitive and simple. They have nothing to do with man's reason except that man, from birth to death, employs his reason in achieving the satisfaction of these instincts. The two oldest and most firmly implanted are the instinct for self-preservation and the instinct to perpetuate the race. The social instinct, much younger than either, is yet thousands upon thousands of years old and quite as ineradicable.

Because it violates the self-preservative instinct no story of suicide can have a wide human audience

unless, in the words of Dick at the close of Masefield's *Lost Endeavour,* we are filled with the feeling that "life goes on." The act of destruction must be, however blindly, an act of immolation on the altar of the race. Such is the feeling we get in reading Jack London's largely autobiographical *Martin Eden;* and in a much more striking instance, the terrible act that closed the life of the heroine in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* falls well before the end of the book. In *Anna Karenina,* as in *War and Peace,* the Russian novelist conveys to every reader an invincible conviction of the unbreakable continuity of the life of the race. The last words of *Anna Karenina* are not those which describe Anna's death under the car wheels but the infinitely hopeful words of Levin:

"I shall continue to be vexed with Ivan the coachman, and get into useless discussions, and express my thoughts blunderingly. I shall always be blaming my wife for what annoys me, and repenting at once. I shall always feel a certain barrier between the Holy of Holies of my inmost soul, and the souls of others, even my wife's. I shall continue to pray without being able to explain to myself why. But my whole life, every moment of my life, independently of whatever may happen to me, will be, not meaningless as before, but full of the deep meaning which I shall have the power to impress upon it."

9

It is because they appeal so strongly and simply and directly to our instinctive desires that the stories of Jack London are so popular; it is their perfect appeal to our social instinct that makes the tales of O. Henry sell thousands of copies month after month. Not even Dickens transcended O. Henry in the perfection of this appeal; and O. Henry set the right value on Dickens as at least one of his stories shows.

Civilization and education refine man's instinctive desires, modify the paths they take, but do not weaken them perceptibly from generation to generation except in a few individual cases. Read the second chapter of Harold Bell Wright's *The Shepherd of the Hills* and observe the tremendous call to the instinct of race perpetuation, prefaced by a character's comment on the careless breeding of man as contrasted with man's careful breeding of animals. And if you think the appeal is crude, be very sure of this: The crudity is in yourself, in the instinct that you are not accustomed to have set vibrating with such healthy vigor.

10

All this deals with broadest fundamentals. But they are what the publisher, judging his manuscript,

must fathom. They are deeper down than the sales manager need go, or the bookseller; deeper than the critic need ordinarily descend in his examination into the book's qualities.

Ordinarily it will be enough for the purpose to analyze a story along the lines of human instinct as it has been modified by our society and our surroundings and conventionalized by habit. The publishers of Eleanor H. Porter's novel *Oh, Money! Money!* were not only wholly correct but quite sufficiently acute in their six reasons for predicting—on the character of the story alone—a big sale.

The first of these was that the yarn dealt with the getting and spending of money, "the most interesting subject in the world," asserted the publishers—and while society continues to be organized on its present basis their assertion is, as regards great masses of mankind, a demonstrable fact.

The second reason was allied to the first; the story would "set every reader thinking how *he* would spend the money." And the third: it was a Cinderella story, giving the reader "the joy of watching a girl who has never been fairly treated come out on top in spite of all odds." This is a powerful appeal to the modified instinct of self-preservation. The fourth reason—"the scene is laid in a little village and the whole book is a gem of country life and shrewd Yankee philosophy"—answers to the social hunger in the human heart.

Fifth: "A charming love theme with a happy ending." Sixth: "The story teaches an unobtrusive lesson . . . that happiness must come from within, and that money cannot buy it." To go behind such reasons is, for most minds, not to clarify but to confuse. Folks feel these things and care nothing about the source of the river of feeling.

II

With the non-fictional book the internal factor making for large sales is as diverse as the kinds of non-fictional volumes. A textbook on a hitherto untreated subject of sudden interest to many thousands of readers has every prospect of a large sale; but this is not the kind of internal factor that a publisher is likely to err in judging! Any alert business man acquiring correct information will profit by such an opportunity.

But there is a book called *In Tune with the Infinite,* the work of a man named Ralph Waldo Trine, which has sold, at this writing, some 530,000 copies, having been translated into eighteen languages. A man has been discovered sitting on the banks of the Yukon reading it; it has been observed in shops and little railway stations in Burmah and Ceylon. This is what is called, not at all badly, an "inspirational book." Don't you think a publisher might well have erred in judging that manuscript?

Mr. Trine's booklet, *The Greatest Thing Ever Known,* has sold 160,000 copies; his book *What All the World's A-Seeking,* is in its 138,000th. It will not do to overlook the attractiveness of these titles. What, most people will want to know, is "the greatest thing ever known"? And it is human to suppose that what you are seeking is what all the world is after, and to want to read a book that holds out an implied promise to help you get it.

The tremendous internal factor of these books of Mr. Trine's is that they articulate simple (but often beautiful) ideas that lie in the minds of hundreds of thousands of men and women, ideas unformulated and by the hundred thousand unutterable. For any man who can say the thing that is everywhere felt, the audience is limitless.

In autobiography a truly big sale is not possible unless the narrative has the fundamental qualities we have designated as necessary in the fictional best seller. All the popular autobiographies are stories that appeal powerfully to our instinctive desires and this is the fact with such diverse revelations as those of Benjamin Franklin and Benvenuto Cellini, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Henry Adams. The sum of the instinctive desires is always overwhelmingly in favor of normal human existences. For this reason the predetermined audience of Mr. Tarkington's *Conquest of Canaan* is many times greater than that of Mr. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie.* A mo-

ment's reflection will show that this is inevitable, since these instinctive desires of ours are so many resistless forces exerted simultaneously on us and combining, in a period of years, to make a single resultant force impelling us to lead normal, sane, "healthy" and wholesome lives. On such lives, lived by the vast majority of men and women everywhere, the security of every form of human society depends; indeed, the continued existence of man on the face of the earth is dependent upon them.

You may say that Rousseau, Cellini, Marie Bashkirtseff, even Franklin and Henry Adams, led existences far from normal. The answer is that we accept the stories of their lives in fact where we (or most of us) would never accept them in fiction. We know that these lives were lived; and the very circumstance that they were abnormal lives makes us more eager to know about and understand them. What most of us care for most is such a recital as Hamlin Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border*. The secret of the influence of the life of Abraham Lincoln upon the American mind and the secret of the appeal made by Theodore Roosevelt, the man, to his countrymen in general during his lifetime is actually one and the same—the triumph of normal lives, lived normally, lived up to the hilt, and overshadowing almost everything else contemporary with them. Such men vindicate common lives, however humbly lived. We see, as in

an apocalyptic vision, what any one of us may become; and in so far as any one of us has become so great we all of us share in his greatness.

12

But perhaps the greatest element in predetermining the possible audience for a non-fiction book is its timeliness. Important, often enough, in the case of particular novels, the matter of timeliness is much more so with all other books soever. It cannot be overlooked in autobiography; *The Education of Henry Adams* attracted a great host of readers in 1918 and 1919 because it became accessible to them in 1918 and not in 1913 or 1929. In 1918 and 1919 the minds of men were peculiarly troubled. Especially about education. H. G. Wells was articulating the disastrous doubts that beset numbers of us, first, in *Joan and Peter,* with its subtitle, *The Story of an Education,* drawing up an indictment which, whatever its bias, distortion and unfairness yet contained a lot of terrible truth; and then, in *The Undying Fire,* dedicated "to all schoolmasters and schoolmistresses and every teacher in the world," returning to the subject, but this time constructively. Yes, a large number of persons were thinking about education in 1918-19, and the ironical attitude of Henry Adams toward his own was of keenest interest to them.

13

We have discussed the internal factor which makes for a big sale in books rather sketchily because, as a whole, book publishers can tell it when they see it (all that is necessary) even though it may puzzle authors who haven't mastered it. So far as authors are concerned we believe that this factor can, in many instances, be mastered. The enterprise is not different from developing a retentive memory, or skill over an audience in public speaking; but as with both these achievements no short cut is really possible and advice and suggestion (you can't honestly call it instruction) can go but a little way. No end of nonsense has been uttered on the subject of what it is in books that makes them sell well, and nonsense will not cease to be uttered about it while men write. What is of vastly more consequence than any effort to exploit the internal factor in best sellers is the failure to make every book published sell its best. If, in general, books sell not more than one-quarter the number of copies they should sell, an estimate to which we adhere, then the immediate and largest gain to publishers, authors and public will be in securing 100 per cent. sales.

14

A word in closing about the familiar argument that the habits of our people have changed, that

they no longer have time to read books, that motoring and movies have usurped the place of reading.

Intercommunication is not a luxury but a necessity. Transportation is only a means of intercommunication. As the means of intercommunication —books, newspapers, mail services, railroads, aircraft, telephones, automobiles, motion pictures— multiply the use of each and every one increases with one restriction: A new means of intercommunication paralleling but greatly improving an existing means will largely displace it—as railroads have largely superseded canals.

As a means of a particular and indispensable kind of intercommunication nothing has yet appeared that parallels and at the same time decidedly improves upon books. Newspapers and magazines do not and cannot, though they most nearly offer the same service. You cannot go in your Ford to hear from the lips of Mr. Tarkington his new novel and seeing it on the screen isn't the same thing as reading it—as we all know. And until some inventor enables us to sit down with an author and get his story whole, at our own convenience and related in his own words, by some device much more attractive than reading a book,—why, until then books will be bought and read in steadily increasing numbers. For with its exercise the taste for intercommunication intensifies. To have been somewhere is to want to read about it, to have read about a

place is to want to go there in innumerable instances. It is a superficial view that sees in the spread of automobiles and motion pictures an arrest of reading. As time goes on and more and more people read books, both absolutely and relatively to the growth of populations, shall we hear a wail that people's habits have changed and that the spread of book-reading has checked the spread of automobiling and lessened the attendance at the picture shows? Possibly we shall hear that outcry but we doubt it; nor does our doubt rest upon any feeling that books will not be increasingly read.

WRITING A NOVEL

VIII

WRITING A NOVEL

THERE are at least as many ways of writing a novel as there are novelists and doubtless there are more; for it is to be presumed that every novelist varies somewhat in his methods of labor. The literature on the business of novel-writing is not extensive. Some observations and advice on the part of Mr. Arnold Bennett are, indeed, about all the average reader encounters; we have forgotten whether they are embedded in *The Truth About An Author* or in that other masterpiece, *How to Live on 2,400 Words a Day.* It may be remarked that there is no difficulty in living on 2,400 words a day, none at all, where the writer receives five cents a word or better.

But there we go, talking about money, a shameful subject that has only a backstairs relation to Art. Let us ascend the front staircase together, first. Let us enter the parlor of Beauty-Is-Truth-Truth-Beauty, which, the poet assured us, is all we know or need to know. Let us seat ourselves in lovely æsthetic surroundings. If later we have to

go out the back way maybe we can accomplish it unobserved.

There are only three motives for writing a novel. The first is to satisfy the writer's self, the second is to please or instruct other persons, the third is to earn money. We will consider these motives in order.

2

The best novels are written from a blending of all three motives. But it is doubtful if a good novel has ever been written in which the desire to satisfy some instinct in himself was not present in the writer's purpose.

Just what this instinct is can't so easily be answered. Without doubt the greatest part of it is the instinct of paternity. Into the physiological aspects of the subject we shall not enter, though they are supported by a considerable body of evidence. The longing to father—or mother—certain fictitious characters is not often to be denied. Sometimes the story as a story, as an entity, is the beloved child of its author. Did not Dickens father Little Nell? How, do you suppose, Barrie has thought of himself in relation to some of his youngsters? Any one who has read *Lore of Proserpine* not only believes in fairies but understands the soul of Maurice Hewlett. The relation of the

creator of a story to his persons is not necessarily parental. It is always intensely human.

O. Henry was variously a Big Brother (before the Big Brothers had been thought of), a father, an uncle, a friend, a distant cousin, a mere acquaintance, a sworn enemy of his people. It has to be so. For the writer lives among the people he creates. The cap of Fortunatus makes him invisible to them but he is always there—not to interfere with them nor to shape their destinies but to watch them come together or fly apart, to hear what they say, to guess what they think (from what they say and from the way they behave), to worry over them, applaud them, frown; but forever as a recorder.

3

None of the author's troubles must appear in the finished record. Still wearing Fortunatus's cap he is required to be as invisible to the reader as to the people he describes. There are exceptions to this rule. Dickens was the most notable. Many readers prefer to have a tale told them by a narrator frankly prejudiced in favor of some of the characters and against others. Many—but not a majority.

In the best novel that Booth Tarkington has so far written, *The Flirt,* the dominating figure is a heartless young woman to whom the reader con-

tinuously itches to administer prussic acid in a fatal dose. But Mr. Tarkington does not scald Cora Madison with boiling invective nor blister her with hot irony. He relates her doings in the main almost dispassionately; and set forth thus nakedly they are more damnable than any amount of sound and fury could make them appear to be. Mr. Tarkington does not wave the prussic acid bottle, though here and there, distilled through his narrative and perceptible more in the things he selects to tell about than in his manner of telling them, the reader is conscious of a faint odor of almond blossoms, signifying that the author has uncorked the acid bottle—perhaps that his restraint in not emptying it may be the more emphasized.

May we set things down a little at random? Then let us seize this moment to point out to the intending novel writer some omissions in *The Flirt*. Our pupil will, when he comes to write his novel, be certain to think of the "strong scenes." He will be painfully eager to get them down. It is these scenes that will "grip" the reader and assure his book of a sale of 100,000 copies.

Battle, murder and sudden death are generally held to be the very meat of a strong scene. But when the drunkard Ray Vilas, Cora Madison's discarded lover, shoots down Valentine Corliss and then kills himself, Mr. Tarkington does not fill pages with it. He takes scarce fifteen lines—per-

haps a little over 100 words—to tell of the double slaying. Nor does he relate what Ray Vilas and Cora said to each other in that last interview which immediately preceded the crime. "Probably," says Mr. Tarkington, "Cora told him the truth, all of it; though of course she seldom told quite the truth about anything in which she herself was concerned" —or words to that effect.

Where oh where is the strong scene? Ah, one man's strength is another's weakness. *The Flirt* is full of strong scenes but they are infrequently the scenes which the intending novel writer, reviewing his tale before setting to work, would select as the most promising.

4

Besides the instinct of paternity—or perhaps in place of it—the novelist may feel an instinct to build something, or to paint a beautiful picture, or mold a lovely figure. This yearning of the artist, so-called, is sometimes denoted by the word "self-expression," a misnomer, if it be not a euphuism, for the longing to fatherhood. There is just as much "self-expression" in the paternity of a boy or a girl as in the creation of a book, a picture or a building. The child, in any case, has innumerable other ancestors; you are not the first to have written such a book or painted such a picture.

How about the second motive in novel-writing, the desire to please or instruct others? The only safe generalization about it seems to be this: A novel written exclusively from this motive will be a bad novel. A novel is not, above everything, a didactic enterprise. Yet even those enterprises of the human race which are in their essence purely didactic, designed "to warn, to comfort, to command," such as sermons and lessons in school, seldom achieve their greatest possible effect if instruction or improvement be the preacher's or teacher's unadorned and unconcealed and only purpose.

Take a school lesson. Teachers who get the best results are invariably found to have added some element besides bare instruction to their work. Sometimes they have made the lesson entertaining; sometimes they have exercised that imponderable thing we call "personal magnetism"; sometimes they have supplied an incentive to learn that didn't exist in the lesson itself.

Take a sermon. If the auditor does not feel the presence in it of something besides the mere intelligence the words convey the sermon leaves the auditor cold.

Pure intellect is not a force in human affairs. Bach wrote music with a very high intellectual content but the small leaven of sublime melody is present in his work that lasts through the centuries. Shakespeare and Beethoven employed intellect and

emotionalism in the proportion of fifty-fifty. Sir Joshua Reynolds mixed his paint "with brains, sir"; but the significant thing is that Sir Joshua did not use only gray matter on his palette. Those who economize on emotionalism in one direction usually make up for it, not always consciously, in another. Joseph Hergesheimer, writing *Java Head,* is very sparing in the emotionalism bound up with action and decidedly lavish in the emotionalism inseparable from sensuous coloring and "atmosphere."

No, a novel written wholly to instruct will never do; but neither will a novel written entirely to please, to give æsthetic or sensuous enjoyment to the reader. Such a novel is like a portion of a fine French sauce—with nothing to spread it on. It is honey without a crust to dip.

5

Writing a novel purely to make money has a tainted air, thanks to the long vogue of a false tradition. If so, *The Vicar of Wakefield* ought to be banished from public libraries; for Goldsmith needed the money and made no bones about saying so. The facts are, of course, unascertainable; but we would be willing to wager, were there any way of deciding the bet, that more novels of the first rank have been written either solely or preponder-

antly to earn money than for any other reason whatever.

It isn't writing for the sake of the money that determines the merit of the result; *that* is settled by two other factors, the author's skill and the author's conscience. And the word "skill" here necessarily includes each and every endowment the writer possesses as well as such proficiency as he may have acquired.

Suppose A. and B. both to have material for a first-rate novel. Both are equally skilled in novel writing. Both are equally conscientious. A. writes his novel for his own satisfaction and to please and instruct others. He is careful and honest about it. He delights in it. B. writes his novel purely to make a few thousand dollars. He is, naturally, careful and honest in doing the job; and he probably takes such pleasure in it as a man may take in doing well anything he can do well, from laying a sewer to flying an airplane. We submit that B.'s may easily be the better novel. It is true that B. is under a pressure that A. does not know and that B.'s work may be affected in ways of which he is not directly aware by the necessity to sell his finished product. But most of the best work in the world is done under some compulsion or other; and it is the sum of human experience that the compulsion to do work which will find favor in the eyes of the worker's fellows is the healthfullest

compulsion of them all. Certainly it is more healthful than the compulsion merely to please yourself. And if B. is under a pressure A.'s danger lies precisely in the fact that he is not under a pressure, or under too slight a pressure. It is a tenable hypothesis that Flaubert would have been a better novelist if he had had to make a living by his pen. Some indirect evidence on the point may possibly be found in the careers of certain writers whose first books were the product of a need to buy bread and butter; and whose later books were the product of no need at all—nor met any.

So much for motives in novel-writing. You should write (1) because you need the money, (2) to satisfy your own instincts, and (3) to please and, perchance, instruct other persons.

Take a week or two to get your motives in order and then, and not until then, read what follows, which has to do with how you are presently to proceed about the business of writing your novel.

6

It is settled that you are going to write a novel. You have examined your motive and found it pure and worthy of you. Comes now the great question of how to set about the business.

At this point let no one rise up and "point out" that Arnold Bennett has told how. Arnold Ben-

nett has told how to do everything—how to live on twenty-four hours a day (but not how to enjoy it), how to write books, how to acquire culture, how to be yourself and manage yourself (in the unfortunate event that you cannot be some one else or have no one, like a wife, to manage you), how to do everything, indeed, except rise up and call Arnold Bennett blessed.

The trouble with Mr. Bennett's directions is—they won't work.

Mr. Bennett tells you to write like everything and get as much of your novel done as possible before the Era of Discouragement sets in. Then, no matter how great your Moment of Depression, you will be able to stand beside the table, fondly stroking a pile of pages a foot high, and reassure yourself, saying: "Well, but here, at least, is so much done. No! I cannot take my hand from the plough now! No! I must Go On. I must complete my destiny." (One's novel is always one's Destiny of the moment.)

It sounds well, but the truth is that when you strike the Writer's Doldrums the sight of all that completed manuscript only enrages you to the last degree. You are embittered by the spectacle of so much effort wasted. You feel like tearing it up or flinging it in the wastebasket. If you are a Rudyard Kipling or an Edna Ferber, you do that thing. And your wife or your mother carefully re-

trieves your *Recessional* or your *Dawn O'Hara* and sends it to the publisher who brings it out, regardless of expense, and sells a large number of copies —to the booksellers, anyway.

Mr. Bennett also tells you how to plan the long, slow culminant movement of your novel; how to walk in the park and compose those neat little climaxes which should so desirably terminate each chapter; how to—— But what's the use? Let us illustrate with a fable.

Once an American, meeting Mr. Bennett in London, saluted him, jocularly (he meant it jocularly) with the American Indian word of greeting: "How?"

Mr. Bennett immediately began to tell him how and the American never got away until George H. Doran, the publisher, who was standing near by, exclaimed:

"That's enough, Enoch, for a dollar volume!"

(Mr. Doran, knowing Bennett well, calls him by his first name, a circumstance that should be pointed out to G. K. Chesterton, who would evolve a touching paradox about the familiarity of the unfamiliar.)

That will do for Arnold. If we mention Arnold again it must distinctly be understood that we have reference to some other Arnold—Benedict Arnold or Matthew Arnold or Dorothy Arnold or Arnold Daly.

Well, to get back (in order to get forward), you are about beginning your novel (nice locution, "about beginning") and are naturally taking all the advice you can get, if it doesn't cost prohibitively, and this we are about to give doesn't.

The first thing for you to do is not, necessarily, to decide on the subject of your novel.

It is not absolutely indispensable to select the subject of a novel before beginning to write it. Many authors prefer to write a third or a half of the novel before definitely committing themselves to a particular theme. For example, take *The Roll Call,* by Arnold—it must have been Arnold Constable, or perhaps it was Matthew. *The Roll Call* is a very striking illustration of the point we would make. Somewhere along toward the end of *The Roll Call* the author decided that the subject of the novel should be the war and its effect on the son of Hilda Lessways by her bigamous first husband—or, he wasn't exactly her husband, being a bigamist, but we will let it go at that. Now Hilda Lessways was, or became, the wife of Edwin Clayhanger; and George Cannon, Clayhanger's—would you say, stepson? Hilda's son, anyway—George Cannon, the son of a gun—oh, pardon, the son of Bigamist Cannon—the stepson of, or son of the wife of, Edwin Clayhanger of the Five Towns—George Cannon . . . Where were we? . . .

Hilda Lessways Clayhanger, the—well, wife—of Bigamist Cannon. . . .

The relationships in this novel are very confusing, like the novel and the subject of it, but if you can read the book you will see that it illustrates our point perfectly.

7

Well, go ahead and write. Don't worry about the subject. You know how it is, a person often can't see the forest for the trees. When you're writing 70,000 words or maybe a few more you can't expect to see your way out of 'em very easily. When you are out of the trees you can look back and see the forest. And when you are out of the woods of words you can glance over 'em and find out what they were all about.

However, the 80,000 words have to be written, and it is up to you, somehow or other, to set down the 90,000 parts of speech in a row. Now 100,000 words cannot be written without taking thought. Any one who has actually inscribed 120,000 words knows that. Any one who has written the 150,000 words necessary to make a good-sized novel (though William Allen White wouldn't call *that* good measure) understands the terrible difficulties that confront a mortal when he sits down to enter upon the task of authorship, the task of putting on

paper the 200,000 mono- or polysyllables that shall hold the reader breathless to the end, if only from the difficulty of pronouncing some of them.

Where to start? For those who are not yet equipped with self-starters we here set down a few really first-class openings for either the spring or fall novel trade:

"Marinda was frightened. When she was frightened her eyes changed color. They were dark now, and glittering restlessly like the sea when the wind hauls northwest. Jack Hathaway, unfamiliar with weather signs, took no heed of the impending squall. He laughed recklessly, dangerously. . . ." (Story of youth and struggle.)

"The peasant combed the lice from his beard, spat and said, grumbling: 'Send us ploughs that we may till the soil and save Russia. . . . Send us ploughs.'" (Realistic story of Russia.)

"Darkness, suave, dense, enfolding, lay over the soft loam of the fields. The girl, moving silently across the field, felt the mystery of the dark; the scent of the soil and the caress of the night alike enchanted her. Hidden in the folds of her dress, clutched tightly in her fingers, was the ribbon he had given her. With a quick indrawing of her breath she paused, and, screened by the utter blackness that enveloped her, pressed it to her lips. . . ." (Story of the countryside. Simple, trusting innocence. Lots of atmosphere. After crossing the

field the girl strikes across Haunted Heath, a description of which fills the second chapter.)

All these are pretty safe bets, if you're terribly hard up. Think them over. Practise them daily for a few weeks.

8

Now that you have some idea about writing a novel it may be as well for you to consider the consequences before proceeding to the irrevocable act.

One of the consequences will certainly be the discovery of many things in the completed manuscript that you never intended. This is no frivolous allusion to the typographical errors you will find —for a typewriter is as capable of spoonerisms as the human tongue. We have reference to things that you did not consciously put into your narrative.

And first let it be said that many things that seem to you unconscious in the work of skilled writers are deliberate art (as the phrase goes). The trouble is that the deliberation usually spoils the art. An example must be had and we will take it in a novel by the gifted American, Joseph Hergesheimer. Before proceeding further with this Manual for Beginners read *Java Head* if you can; if not, never mind.

Now in *Java Head* the purpose of Mr. Hergesheimer was, aside from the evocation of a beautiful

bit of a vanished past, the delineation of several persons of whom one represented the East destroyed in the West and another the West destroyed in the East. Edward Dunsack, back in Salem, Massachusetts, the victim of the opium habit, represented the West destroyed in the East; the Chinese wife of Gerrit Ammidon represented the East destroyed in the West. Mr. Hergesheimer took an artist's pride in the fact that the double destruction was accomplished with what seemed to him the greatest possible economy of means; almost the only external agency employed, he pointed out, was opium. Very well; this is æstheticism, pure and not so simple as it looks. It is a Pattern. It is a musical phrase or theme presented as a certain flight of notes in the treble, repeated or echoed and inverted in the bass. It is a curve on one side of a staircase balanced by a curve on the other. It is a thing of symmetry and grace and it is the expression, perfect in its way, of an idea. Kipling expressed very much the same idea when he told us that East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet. Mr. Hergesheimer amplifies and extends. If the two are brought in contact each is fatal to the other. Is that all?

It is not all, it is the mere beginning. When you examine *Java Head* with the Pattern in mind you immediately discover that the Pattern is car-

ried out in bewildering detail. Everything is symmetrically arranged. For instance, many a reader must have been puzzled and bewildered by the heartbreaking episode at the close of the novel in which Roger Brevard denies the delightful girl Sidsall Ammidon. The affair bears no relation to the currents of the tale; it is just a little eddy to one side; it is unnecessarily cruel and wounding to our sensibilities. Why have it at all?

The answer is that in his main narrative Mr. Hergesheimer has set before us Gerrit Ammidon, a fellow so quixotic that he marries twice out of sheer chivalry. He has drawn for us the fantastic scroll of such a man, a sea-shape not to be matched on shore. Well, then, down in the corner, he must inscribe for us another contrasting, balancing, compensating, miniatured scroll—a land-shape in the person of Roger Brevard who is so unquixotic as to offset Gerrit Ammidon completely. Gerrit Ammidon will marry twice for incredible reasons and Roger Brevard will not even marry once for the most compelling of reasons—love. The beautiful melody proclaimed by the violins is brutally parodied by the tubas.

9

Is it all right thus? It is not all right thus and it never can be so long as life remains the unpat-

terned thing we discern it to be. If life were completely patterned it would most certainly not be worth living. When we say that life is unpatterned we mean, of course, that we cannot read all its patterns (we like to assume that all patterns are there, because it comforts us to think of a fundamental Order and Symmetry).

But so long as life is largely unpatterned, or so long as we cannot discern all its patterns, life is eager, interesting, surprising and altogether distracting and lovely however bewildering and distressing, too. Different people take the unreadable differently. Some, like Thomas Hardy, take it in defiant bitterness of spirit; some, like Joseph Conrad, take it in profound faith and wonder. Hardy sees the disorder that he cannot fathom; Conrad admires the design that he can only incompletely trace. To Hardy the world is a place where—

> "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
> They kill us for their sport."

To Conrad the world is a place where men may continually make the glorious and heartening discovery that a solidarity exists among them; that they are united by a bond as unbreakable as it is mysterious.

And to others, as regrettably to Mr. Hergesheimer writing *Java Head,* the world is a place

where it is momentarily sufficient to trace casual symmetries without thought of their relation to an ineluctable whole.

10

What, then, is the novelist to do? Is it not obvious that he must not busy himself too carefully with the business of patterning the things he has to tell? For the moment he has traced everything out nicely and beautifully he may know for a surety that he has cut himself off from the larger design of Life. He has got his little corner of the Oriental rug all mapped out with the greatest exactitude. But he has lost touch with the bigger intricacy beyond his corner. It is a prayer rug. He had better kneel down and pray.

Now there are novels in which no pattern at all is traced; and these are as bad as those which minutely map a mere corner. These are meaningless and confused stories in which nobody can discern any cause or effect, any order or law, any symmetry or proportion or expressed idea. These are the novels which have been justified as a "slice of life" and which have brought into undeserved disrepute the frequently painstaking manner of their telling. The trouble is seldom primarily, as so many people think, with the material but with its presentation. You may take almost any material you like and so present it as to make it mean

something; and you may also take almost any material you like and so present it as to make it mean nothing to anybody. A heap of bricks is meaningless; but the same bricks are intelligible expressed as a building of whatever sort, or merely as a sidewalk with zigzags, perhaps, of a varicolor.

The point we would make—and we might as well try to drive it home without further ineffectual attempts at illustration—is that you must do some patterning with your material, whether bricks for a building or lives for a story; but if you pattern too preciously your building will be contemptible and your story without a soul. In your building you must not be so decided as to leave no play for another's imagination, contemplating the structure. In your narrative you must not be so dogmatic about two and two adding to four as to leave no room for a wild speculation that perhaps they came to five. For it is not the certainty that two and two have always made four but the possibility that some day they may make five that makes life worth living—and guessing about on the printed page.

II

Perhaps the most serious consequence of writing a novel is the revelation of yourself it inevitably entails.

We are not thinking, principally, of the discovery you will make of the size of your own soul. We have in mind the laying bare of yourself to others.

Of course you do reveal yourself to yourself when you write a book to reveal others to others. It has been supposed that a man cannot say or do a thing which does not expose his nature. This is nonsense; you do not expose your nature every time you take the subway, though a trip therein may very well be an index to your manners. The fact remains that no man ever made a book or a play or a song or a poem, with any command of the technique of his work, without in some measure giving himself away. Where this is not enough of an inducement some other, such as a tin whistle with every bound copy, is offered; no small addition as it enables the reviewer to declare, hand on heart, that "this story is not to be whistled down the wind." Some have doubted Bernard Shaw's Irishism, which seems the queerer as nearly everything he has written has carried a shillelagh concealed between the covers. Recently Frank K. Reilly of Chicago gave away one-cent pieces to advertise a book called *Penny of Top Hill Trail.* He might be said, and in fact he hereby is said, thus to have coppered his risk in publishing it. . . . All of which is likely to be mistaken for jesting. Let us therefore jest that we may be taken with utmost seriousness.

The revelation of yourself to yourself, which the mere act of writing a novel brings to pass, may naturally be either pleasant or unpleasant. Very likely it is unpleasant in a majority of instances, a condition which need not necessarily reflect upon our poor human nature. If we did not aspire so high for ourselves we should not suffer such awful disappointments on finding out where we actually get off. The only moral, if there is one, lies in our ridiculous aim. Imagine the sickening of heart with which Oscar Wilde contemplated himself after completing *The Picture of Dorian Grey!* And imagine the lift it must have given him to look within himself as he worked at *The Ballad of Reading Gaol!* The circumstances of life and even the actual conduct of a man are not necessarily here or there—or anywhere at all—in this intimate contemplation. There is one mirror before which we never pose. God made man in His own image. God made His own image and put it in every man.

It is there! Nothing in life transcends the wonder of the moment when, each for himself, we make this discovery. Then comes the struggle to remold ourselves nearer to our heart's desire. It succeeds or it doesn't; perhaps it succeeds only slightly; anyway we try for it. The sleeper, twisting and turning, dreaming and struggling, is the perfect likeness of ourselves in the waking hours of our whole earthly existence. Because they have

seen this some have thought life no better than a nightmare. Voltaire suggested that the earth and all that dwelt thereon was only the bad dream of a god on some other planet. We would point out the bright side of this possibility: It presupposes the existence somewhere of a mince pie so delicious and so powerful as to evoke the likenesses of Cæsar and Samuel Gompers, giraffes, Mr. Taft, violets, Mr. Roosevelt, Piotr Ilitch Tchaikovski, Billy Sunday, Wu-Ting Fang, Helen of Troy and Mother Jones, groundhogs, H. G. Wells; perhaps Bolshevism is the last writhe. Mince pie, unwisely eaten instead of the dietetic nectar and ambrosia, may well explain the whole confused universe. And you and I—we can create another universe, equally exciting, by eating mince pie to-night! . . . You see there is a bright side to everything, for the mince pie is undoubtedly of a heavenly flavor.

We were saying, when sidetracked by the necessity of explaining the universe, that the self-revelation which writing a book entails is in most cases depressing, but not by any means always so. Boswell was not much of a man judged by the standards of his own day or ours, either one, yet Boswell knew himself better than he knew Dr. Johnson by the time he had finished his life of the Doctor. It must have bucked him up immensely to know that he was at least big enough himself to measure a bigger man up and down, in and out, criss-cross

and sideways, setting down the complicated result without any error that the human intelligence can detect. It must have appeased the ironical soul of Henry Adams to realise that he was one of the very few men who had never fooled himself about himself, and that evidence of his phenomenal achievement in the shape of the book *The Education of Henry Adams,* would survive him after his death—or at least, after the difficulties of communicating with those on earth had noticeably increased (we make this wise modification lest someone match Sir Oliver Lodge's *Raymond, or Life After Death* with a volume called *Henry, or Re-Education After Death*).

It must have sent a thrill of pleasure through the by no means insensitive frame of Joseph Conrad when he discovered, on completing *Nostromo,* that he had a profounder insight into the economic bases of modern social and political affairs than nine-tenths of the professional economists and sociologists—plus a knowledge of the human heart that they have never dreamed worth while. For Conrad saw clearly, and so saw simply; the "silver of the mine" of this, his greatest story, was, it is true, an incorruptible metal, but it could and did alter the corruptible nature of man—and would continue to do so through generation after generation long after his Mediterranean sailor-hero had become dust.

Even in the case of the humble and unknown writer whose completed manuscript, after many tedious journeys, comes home to him at last, to be re-read regretfully but with an undying belief not so much in the work itself as in what it was meant to express and so evidently failed to—even in his case the great consolation is the attestation of a creed. Very bad men have died, as does the artist in Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma,* voicing with clarity and beauty the belief in which they think they have lived or ought to have lived; but a piece of work is always an actual living of some part of the creed that is in you. It may be a failure but it has, with all its faults, a gallant quality, the quality of the deed done, which men have always admired, and because of which they have invented those things we call words to embody their praise.

But what of the consequences of revealing yourself to others? Writing a novel will surely mean that you will incur them. We must speak of them briefly; and then we may get on to the thing for which you are doubtless waiting with terrible patience—the way to write the novel itself. Never fear! If you will but endure steadfastly you shall Know All.

12

"Certainly, publish everything," commented the New York *Times* editorially upon a proposal to

give out earnings, or some other detail, of private businesses. "All privacy is scandalous," added the newspaper. In this satirical utterance lies the ultimate justification for writing a novel.

All privacy *is* scandalous. If you don't believe it, read some of the prose of James Joyce. *A Portrait of The Artist As a Young Man* will do for a starter. *Ulysses* is a follow-up. H. G. Wells likes the first, while deploring so much sewerage in the open street. You see, nothing but a sincere conviction concerning the wickedness of leaving anything at all unmentioned in public could justify such narratives as Mr. Joyce's.

In a less repulsive sense, the scandal of privacy is what underlies any novel of what we generally call the "realistic" sort. Mr. Dreiser, for instance, thinks it scandalous that we should not know and publicly proclaim the true nature of such men as Hurstwood in his *Sister Carrie*. Mr. Hardy thinks it scandalous that the world should not publicly acknowledge the purity of Tess Durbeyfield and therefore he gives us a book in which she is, as the subtitle says, "faithfully presented." Gene Stratton-Porter thinks it scandalous not to tell the truth about such a boy as Freckles. The much-experienced Mr. Tarkington, stirred to his marrow by what seems almost a world conspiracy to condone the insufferable conceit of the George Amberson Minafers among us, writes *The Mag-*

nificent Ambersons to make us confess how we hate 'em—and how our instinctive faith in them is vindicated at last.

Every novelist who gains a public of any size or permanence deliberately, and even joyfully, faces the consequences of the revelation of himself to some thousands of his fellow-creatures. We don't mean that he always delineates himself in the person of a character, or several characters, in his stories. He may do that, of course, but the self-exposure is generally much more merciless. The novelist can withhold from the character which, more or less, stands for himself his baser qualities. What he cannot withhold from the reader is his own mind's limitations.

A novel is bounded by the author's horizons. If a man can see only so far and only so deep his book will show it. If he cannot look abroad, but can perceive nothing beyond the nose on his face, that fact will be fully apparent to his co-spectators who turn the pages of his story. If he can see only certain colors those who look on with him will be aware of his defect. Above all, if he can see persons as all bad or all good, all black or all white, he will be hanged in effigy along with the puppets he has put on paper.

This is the reason why every one should write a novel. There is only one thing comparable with it as a means of self-immolation. That, of course,

is tenure of public office. And as there are not nearly enough public offices to serve the need of individual discipline, novelizing should be encouraged, fomented—we had almost said, made compulsory. Compulsion, however, defeats its own ends. Let us elect to public offices, as we would choose to fill scholarships, those who cannot, through some misfortune, write novels; and let us induce all the other people in the world that we can to put pen to paper—not that they may enrich the world with immortal stories, not that they may make money, become famous or come to know themselves, but solely that we may know them for what they are.

If Albert Burleson had been induced to write a novel would we have made him a Congressman and would President Wilson have made him Postmaster-General? If William, sometime of Germany, had written a novel would the Germans have acquiesced in his theory of Divine Right? Georges Clemenceau wrote novels and was chosen of the people to lead them. Hall Caine and Marie Corelli and Rider Haggard and Arnold Bennett have written novels which enable us to gauge them pretty accurately—and not one of them has yet been invited to help run the League of Nations. The reason is simple: We know them too well.

All privacy is scandalous. Thomas Dixon says: "It is positively immoral that the world should

run on without knowing the depths to which I can sink. I must write *The Way of a Man* and make the world properly contemptuous of me." Zona Gale reflects to herself: "After all, with nothing but these few romances and these *Friendship Village* stories, people have no true insight into my real tastes, affinities, predilections, qualities of mind. I will write about a fruit and pickle salesman, an ineffectual sort of person who becomes, almost involuntarily, a paperhanger. That will give them the idea of me they lack."

William Allen White, without consciously thinking anything of the kind, is dimly aware that people generally have a right to know him as a big-hearted man who makes some mistakes but whose sympathy is with the individual man and woman and whose passion is for social progress. The best way to make people generally acquainted with William Allen White is to write a novel—say, *In The Heart of a Fool,* which they will read. . . . The best way to get to know anybody is to get him to talking about somebody else. Talk about one's self is a little too self-conscious.

And there you have it! It is exactly because such a writer as H. G. Wells is in reality pretty nearly always talking about himself that we find it so difficult to appraise him rightly on the basis of his novels. Self-consciousness is never absent from a Wells book. It is this acute self-conscious-

ness that makes so much of Henry James valueless to the great majority of readers. They cannot get past it, or behind it. The great test fails. Mr. James is dead, and the only way left to get at the truth of Mr. Wells will be to make him Chancellor of the Exchequer or, in a socialized British republic, Secretary of Un-War. . . .

Dare to be a Daniel Carson Goodman. Write That Novel. Don't procrastinate, don't temporize. Do It Now, reserving all rights of translation of words into action in all countries, including the Scandinavian. Full detailed instructions as to the actual writing follow.

13

You may not have noticed it, but even so successful a novelist as Robert W. Chambers is careful to respect the three unities that Aristotle (wasn't it?) prescribed and the Greeks took always into account. Not in a single one of his fifty novels does the popular Mr. Chambers disregard the three Greek unities. Invariably he looks out for the time, the place and the girl.

If Aristotle recommended it and Robert W. Chambers sticks to it, perhaps you, about to write your first novel, had better attend to it also.

Now, to work! About a title. Better have one, even if it's only provisional, before you begin to

write. If you can, get the real, right title at the outset. Sometimes having it will help you through —not to speak of such cases as Eleanor Hallowell Abbott's. The author of *Molly Make-Believe, The Sick-a-Bed Lady* and *Old-Dad* gets her real, right title and then the story mushrooms out of it, like a house afire. Ourselves, we are personally the same. We have three corking titles for as many novels. One is written. The other two we haven't to worry about. They have only to live up to their titles, which may be difficult for them but will make it easy for ourselves. We have a Standard. Everything that lives up to the promise of our superlative title goes in, everything that is alien to it or unworthy of it, stays out. This, we may add parenthetically, was the original motive in instituting titles of nobility. A man was made a Baron. Very well, it was expected that he would conform his character and conduct accordingly. Things suitable to a Baron he would thenceforth be and do, things unbefitting his new, exalted station he would kindly omit. . . . It works better with books than with people, so cheer up. Your novel will come out more satisfactorily than you think.

Which brings us to the matter of the ending. Should it be happy or otherwise? More words have been wasted on this subject than on any other aspect of fictioneering. You must understand from the very first that you, personally, have noth-

ing whatever to say about the ending of your story. That will be decided by the people of your tale and the events among which they live. In other words, the preponderant force in determining the ending is—inevitability.

Most people misunderstand inevitability. Others merely worry about it, as if it were to-morrow's weather. Shall we take an umbrella, they ask anxiously, lest it rain inevitably? Or will the inevitable come off hot, so that an overcoat will be a nuisance? Nobody knows, not even the weather forecaster in Washington. If there were a corresponding official whose duty it would be to forecast with equal inaccuracy the endings of novels life would go on much the same. Readers would still worry about the last page because they would know that the official prediction would be wrong at least half the time. If the Ending Forecaster prophesied: "Lovers meet happily on page 378; villain probably killed in train accident" we would go drearily forward confident that page 378 would disclose the heroine, under a lowering sky, clasped in the villain's arms while the hero lay prone under a stalled Rolls-Royce, trying to find out why the carburetor didn't carburete.

Inevitability is not the same as heredity. Heredity can be rigorously controlled—novelists are the real eugenists—but inevitability is like natural selection or the origin of species or mutations or O.

Henry: It is the unexpected that happens. Environment has little in common with inevitability. In the pages of any competent novelist the girl in the slums will sooner or later disclose her possession of the most unlikely traits. Her bravery, her innocence will become even more manifest than her beauty. The young feller from Fifth avenue, whose earliest environment included orange spoons and Etruscan pottery, will turn out to be a lowdown brute. Environment is what we want it to be, inevitability is what we are.

You think, of course, that you can pre-determine the outcome of this story you are going to write. Yes, you can! You can no more pre-determine the ending than you can pre-determine the girl your son will marry. It's exactly like that. For you must come face to face, before you have written 50 pages of your book, with an appalling and inspiring Fact. You might as well face it here.

14

The position of the novelist engaged in writing a novel can only be indicated by a shocking exaggeration which is this: He is not much better than a medium in a trance.

Now of course such a statement calls for the most exact explanation. Nobody can give it. Such a statement calls for indisputable evidence. None ex-

ists. Such a statement, unexplained and unsupported by testimony, is a gross and unscientific assumption not even worthy to be damned by being called a hypothesis. You said it. Nevertheless, the thing's so.

We, personally, having written a novel—or maybe two—know what we are talking about. The immense and permanent curiosity of people all over the planet who read books at all fixes itself upon the question, in respect of the novelist: *"How* does he write?" As Mary S. Watts remarks, that is the one thing no novelist can tell you. He doesn't know himself. But though it is the one thing the novelist can't tell you it is not one of those things that, in the words of Artemus Ward, no feller kin find out. Any one can find out by writing a novel.

And to write one you need little beyond a few personalities firmly in mind, a typewriter and lots of white paper. An outline is superfluous and sometimes harmful. Put a sheet of paper in the machine and write the title, in capital letters. Below, write: "By Theophrastus Such," or whatever you happen unfortunately to be called or elect, in bad taste, to call yourself. Begin.

You will have the first few pages, the opening scene, possibly the first chapter, fairly in mind; you may have mental notes on one or two things your

people will say. Beyond that you have only the haziest idea of what it will all be about. Write.

As you write it will come to you. Somehow. What do you care how? Let the psychologists stew over that.

They, in all probability, will figure out that the story has already completely formed itself, in all its essentials and in many details, in your subconscious mind, the lowermost cellar of your uninteresting personality where moth and rust do not corrupt, whatever harm they may do higher up, and where the cobwebs lie even more thickly than in your alleged brain. As you write, and as the result of the mere act of writing, the story, lying dormant in your subcellar, slowly shakes a leg, quivers, stretches, extends itself to its full length, yawns, rises with sundry anatomical contortions and advancing crosses the threshold of your subconsciousness into the well-dusted and cleaned basement of your consciousness whence it is but a step to full daylight and the shadow of printed black characters upon a to-and-fro travelling page.

In other words, you are an automaton; and to be an automaton in this world of exuberant originality is a blissful thing.

Your brain is not engaged at all. This is why writing fiction actually rests the brain. It is why those who are suffering from brain-fag find recreation and enjoyment, health and mental strength in

writing a short story or a novel. The short story is a two weeks' vacation for the tired mind. Writing a novel is a month, with full pay. It is true that readers are rather prone to resent the widespread habit of novelists recuperating and recovering their mental faculties at their readers' expense. This resentment is without any justification in fact, since for every novelist who recovers from brain-fag by writing a work of fiction there are thousands of readers who restore their exhausted intellects with a complete rest by reading the aforesaid work of fiction.

Of course the subconscious cellar theory of novel-writing is not final and authoritative. There is at least one other tenable explanation of how novels are written, and we proceed to give it.

This is that the story is projected through the personality of the writer who is, in all respects, no more than a mechanism and whose role may be accurately compared to that of a telephone transmitter in a talk over the wire.

This theory has the important virtue of explaining convincingly all the worst novels, as well as all the best. For a telephone transmitter is not responsible for what is spoken into it or for what it transmits. It is not to blame for some very silly conversations. It has no merit because it forwards some very wise words. Similarly, if the novelist is merely a transmitter, a peculiarly delicate and sen-

sitive medium for conveying what is said and done somewhere else, perhaps on some other plane by some other variety of mortals, the novelist is in no wise to blame for the performances or utterances of his characters, or clients as they ought, in this view, to be called; the same novelist might, and probably would, be the means of transmitting the news of splendid deeds and the superb utterances of glorious people, composing one story, and the inanities, verbal or otherwise, of a lot of fourth dimensional Greenwich Villagers, constituting another and infinitely inferior story. . . . To be sure this explanation, which relieves the novelist of almost all responsibility for his novels, ought also to take from him all the credit for good work. If he is a painfully conscientious mortal he may grieve for years over this; but if his first or his second or his third book sells 100,000 copies he will probably be willing, in the words of the poet, to take the cash and let the credit go. Very greedy men invariably insist on not merely taking the cash but claiming the credit as well; saintly men clutch at the credit and instruct their publishers that all author's royalties are to be made over to the Fund for Heating the Igloos of Aged and Helpless Eskimos. But the funny thing about the whole business is that the world, which habitually withholds credit where credit is due, at other times insists on bestowing credit anyway. There have been whole human

philosophies based upon the principle of Renunciation and even whole novels, such as those of Henry James. But it doesn't work. Renounce, if you like, all credit for the books which bear your name on the title-page. The world will weave its laurel wreath and crown you with bays just the same. Men have become baldheaded in a single night in the effort to avoid unmerited honor and by noon the next day have looked as if they were bacchantes or at least hardy perennials, so thick have been the vine leaves in their hair, or rather on the site of it. . . . Which takes us away from our subject. Where were we? Oh, yes, about writing your novel. . . .

As soon as you have done two or three days' stint on the book—you ought to plan to write so many words a day or a week, and it's no matter that you don't know what they will be—as soon as you've got a fairish start you will find that you have several persons in your story who are, to all intents and purposes, as much alive as yourself and considerably more self-willed. They will promptly take the story in their hands and you will have nothing to do in the remaining 50,000 words or more but to set down what happens. The extreme physical fatigue consequent upon writing so many words is all you have to guard against. Play golf or tennis, if you can, so as to offset this physical fatigue by the physical rest and intellectual exer-

cise they respectively afford. Auction bridge in the evenings, or, as Frank M. O'Brien says, reading De Morgan and listening to the phonograph, will give you the emotional outlet you seek.

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No doubt many who have read the foregoing will turn up their noses at the well-meant advice it contains, considering that we have largely jested on a serious subject. We take this occasion to declare most earnestly, at the conclusion of our remarks, that we have seldom been so serious in our life. Such occasional levities as we have allowed ourselves to indulge in have been plain and obvious, and of no more importance in the general scheme of what we have been discussing than the story of the Irishman with which the gifted after-dinner speaker circumspectly introduces his most burning thoughts.

We mean what we have said. Writing a novel is one of the most rounded forms of self-education. It is one of the most honorable too, since, unlike the holder of public office, the person who is getting the education does not do so at the public expense. We have regard, naturally, to the mere act of *writing* the novel. If afterward it finds a publisher and less probably a public—that has nothing to do with the author, whose self-culture, intensive, satisfying

and wholesome, has been completed before that time.

Whether a novelist deserves any credit for the novel he writes is a question, but he will get the credit for it anyway and nothing matters where so wonderful an experience is to be gained. Next to being hypnotized, there is nothing like it; and it has the great advantage that you know what you are doing whereas the hypnotic subject does not. No preparation is necessary or even desirable since, even in so specific a detail as the outline of the story the people of your narrative take things entirely in their own hands and reduce the outline to the now well-known status of a scrap of paper. . . . We talk of "advice" in writing a novel. The best advice is not to take any.

THE END

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